

‘No work, No pay’: A multimodal discourse analysis of selected online images on industrial actions by Nigerian public universities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/dcm**Deborah A Fifelola** 

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Abstract

This study investigates the social semiotics of online images on selected social media platforms, newspaper websites and other internet sites to explore the meaning-making resources used to visualise the 2022 Academic Staff Union of Universities' strike in Nigeria. Using a multimodal discourse analytic approach, this study conducts qualitative data analysis of 50 purposively selected online images (cartoons and memes) to uncover their underlying themes and discursive strategies. The analysis reveals that the images predominantly depict students as victims of the strike, the government as perpetrators and the Academic Staff Union of Universities as victims and instigators. These depictions highlight the victimisation of Nigerian students while emphasising the negative other-representation of both the government and the union. Through this examination, the paper contributes to current research on cartoons and the broader academic field of memes as tools of dissent by offering valuable insights into how online images convey dissenting messages and engage with socio-political issues within the context of Nigerian public universities' industrial actions.

Keywords

2022 ASUU strike, industrial action, cartoons, multimodal discourse, Nigerian universities, protest discourse

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Introduction

Industrial actions, also known as ‘strikes’, serve as tools through which employees exert pressure on their employers to make concessions in bargaining (Creighton et al., 2017: 383). These actions, which are within the purview of the International Labour Organisation and are expected to be peaceful, may involve activities like reduced work pace, partial or complete work stoppages, goods and services boycotts in the workplace and occupation of workplaces (Creighton et al., 2017). Such industrial actions occur in various institutions worldwide, including universities in countries such as Brazil (COHA, 2012), the United Kingdom (Bulbul and Knibbs, 2022) and Nigeria. Tahir (2013) and Adamu and Nwogo (2014) report that labour unions in Nigeria, such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (hereafter ASUU), typically engage in a range of activities as part of their efforts to enhance their welfare, secure access to research facilities and advocate for university autonomy. Since ASUU’s establishment in 1978, the union has initiated 25 industrial actions (Monogbe and Monogbe, 2019) due to the government’s failure to meet the union’s demands. The most recent of these industrial actions lasted approximately 8 months, from February 14 to October 14, 2022. These strikes have resulted in financial losses, delayed students’ graduation, disrupted academic calendars, and other adverse consequences, reducing academic quality and output and diminishing productivity among university staff in Nigerian public universities (Monogbe and Monogbe, 2019). Consequently, various individuals have criticised the government for not fulfilling the union’s demands, leading to numerous industrial actions. These criticisms and protests have taken various forms, including writing letters to the government and newspaper articles (Akinwotu, 2019). Furthermore, others have criticised the union for its frequent resort to strikes, as it often appears that the Nigerian government has not acceded to the union’s demands (Dim et al., 2017). Such criticisms have also appeared in multimodal texts such as memes, cartoons and other image-based content, which are widely shared on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp.

Previous studies on ASUU strikes have investigated critical discourse aspects of language use in media reports of industrial actions in Nigeria and its ideological representations, using the 2013 ASUU strike as a case study (Ellah, 2014; Ugwuona, 2016). While these studies employ critical discourse analysis to explore the 2013 ASUU strike, the present study investigates multimodal texts in the 2022 ASUU strike. Hence, both studies differ in theory, data and methodology. Others have also investigated conceptual metaphors and critical discursive features in media reports and online reader comments on a labour conflict in 2013 between ASUU and the Federal Government of Nigeria (Akinwotu, 2019). Similarly, Al Zidjaly (2014) further examines how Omani teachers effectively used social media to incite change, and underscores the pivotal role of online protests as agents of social change, particularly in education. This research sheds light on the significant contributions of Omani teachers in bringing about economic and social improvements in Oman through the strategic use of multimodal texts. While similar in its educational context, the present study focuses on images related to the 2022 ASUU strike in Nigeria. Despite differing contexts and data, both studies emphasise social media and multimedia’s influential roles in driving change. Comparing these studies

broadens our understanding of how online protests and multimedia foster social change in education, adapting to diverse contexts. Also, many linguistic studies examine how Nigerians protest against events that affect them in the country (Ajayi and Akinrinlola, 2022; Unuabonah and Oyebo, 2021). However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning utilising multimodal resources to unveil the representations of social actors in multimodal texts in the context of the 2022 ASUU strike in Nigeria. Consequently, there is a clear demand for research that sheds light on the socio-semiotic resources employed to effectively communicate vital information through these images. This paper, therefore, explores multimodal discourse features in online images, which are used in protesting ASUU strikes in Nigeria. This is to investigate the representation of different social actors in the images and the socio-semiotic resources that are (re)produced in the images through different socio-semiotic modes.

Much like in other parts of the world, cartoons and memes in Nigeria have emerged as potent media for expressing dissent and frustration regarding ASUU strikes, including the 2022 ASUU strike, offering artists a platform to critique the government, university administrations and the overall state of the education system. Furthermore, these images have been instrumental in raising awareness about the root causes of the ASUU strikes, including issues such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure and the lack of government accountability. Using satire, humour and allegory, cartoonists and meme producers have highlighted the systemic failures and bureaucratic hurdles perpetuating the cycle of strikes and hindering progress in the education sector (Ajayi and Akinrinlola, 2022).

Internet images as tools for online protests

Online protests, often called digital activism, have evolved into a pivotal and dynamic dimension of contemporary social and political movements. In an era defined by digital technology's prevalence and the ubiquity of the internet, online protests have redefined the landscape of activism, providing innovative avenues for individuals and groups to express dissent, advocate for change and mobilise support on a global scale (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). The proliferation and influence of online protests can be attributed to several factors. The accessibility and convenience of digital spaces have reduced entrance barriers for individuals and organisations seeking to voice their concerns or advance their causes. Unlike traditional protests, which often necessitate physical mobilisation, online protests can be initiated from anywhere via an internet connection, increasing participation and broadening the diverse voices involved (Castells, 2012). Moreover, the speed and reach of online protests are unmatched. Information and messages can be disseminated instantaneously through social media platforms, reaching a global audience within seconds. The viral nature of online content, facilitated by likes, shares and retweets, amplifies the impact of these protests.

During the 2022 ASUU strike, visual texts such as cartoons, memes and other internet images were used to protest for or against the 2022 ASUU strike in Nigeria. As Baker and Green (2014) observe, cartoons can succinctly encapsulate complex ideas, making them effective tools for conveying political viewpoints. These digital caricatures have emerged as influential instruments for activists to communicate their messages and

engage with a broad and diverse audience. Cartoons, with their satirical and visually striking nature, are often employed to critique political figures or systems and disseminate messages with wit and humour. Dugalich (2018) describes political cartoons as a genre of political discourse that primarily focuses on political matters, such as events, figures and policies. These cartoons often utilise satire and symbolism to critique or draw attention to political realities, providing commentary on governance, power structures and societal issues. Research on political cartoons consistently highlights their significant influence in shaping public opinion, especially during political unrest, elections or protests. Political cartoons serve as a reflective medium that captures and amplifies societal concerns and views on governance and policies.

Sanni et al. (2012) explored the role of political cartoons in Nigerian newspapers as a tool for setting social agendas. Their findings revealed that 80% of the cartoons focused on significant themes, reflecting social practices within Nigeria's socio-political context. The study also opined that political cartoons in Nigeria largely shape the public agenda by encapsulating pressing and relevant issues that resonate with the population. These findings show that cartoons are a powerful communication medium, allowing the media to establish a social agenda by emphasising the importance of certain issues and events through repeated coverage, ultimately influencing public perception and driving positive societal change. Hence, cartoons attract considerable public attention and help shape public opinion, positioning them as vital to Nigeria's political discourse.

Globally, political cartoons have been studied across various cultural and political contexts, with scholars examining their ability to communicate complex messages through semiotic resources. For instance, Mowafy (2021) explored the portrayal of US foreign policy under Donald Trump's administration in Egyptian political cartoons published by *Al-Ahram Weekly*. The study examined a collection of 20 cartoons featured in the newspaper from January to December 2018. The analysis posited that political cartoons capture significant global political developments and convey public sentiment towards these events. The findings emphasised that cartoons serve as a powerful tool for communication, leveraging visual elements to depict political events through an ideologically driven lens. With a mix of verbal and non-verbal cues, these cartoons employ humour to present complex political viewpoints in an approachable manner, often bypassing censorship concerns. Lulu et al. (2022) analysed political cartoons depicting the displacement of Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah. The findings revealed that the central themes of the cartoons revolve around Israel's oppression and tyranny over Palestinians, particularly through displacement and eradication, while also portraying the Palestinians' resilience, struggle and resistance in response to Israel's forced expulsions. From the reviewed studies, it can be observed that political cartoons carry layered meanings that go beyond their surface-level imagery. These cartoons often serve as a platform for critiquing societal issues, lampooning authority figures or exposing contradictions in social realities. By employing various semiotic resources – such as symbols, colour, metaphors, caricatures and humour – cartoonists effectively highlight current events and invite audiences to engage with them critically. The aim of these cartoons is not just to entertain but to spark public discourse or inspire social and political change.

On the other hand, memes condense ideas or commentary into easily shareable images, often employing humour, irony or sarcasm to make a point. Börzsei (2013) asserts that internet memes are not isolated units but spread within particular sociocultural contexts in groups or 'waves', that is, a set of memes referring to the same topic or having similar formal features. With their satirical and visually striking nature, cartoons often critique political figures or systems and disseminate messages with wit and humour. Conversely, memes condense ideas or commentary into easily shareable images, often employing humour, irony or sarcasm to make a point. Rivas-Carmona (2014) opines that memes are immensely rich in the complexity of their evaluative meanings as verbal and visual resources are mobilised and used to create these meanings. It is argued that internet memes offer a unique perspective on the memetic phenomenon and its effects on culture, particularly the process by which the most popular memes define the culture shared by a community (Heylighen and Chielens, 2009). In a recent study, Oyeboode and Unuabonah (2024) examine how coronavirus-related memes in the Nigerian WhatsApp space use multimodal elements for evaluation and positioning. The study finds that meme producers employ verbal and visual cues to express negative affect, judgement and appreciation. Through resources like disclaimers and entertainment, they engage the public to critique pandemic responses and offer support. The study concludes that these appraisal choices help communicate dissatisfaction with the pandemic's effects and the behaviour of different agents during the pandemic. Therefore, as multimodal texts, online images combine different communicative modes (verbal and non-verbal) to express cognitive effects intended to be captured by the readers so that they can obtain the full meaning of the communicative text. As discrete digital objects circulated online, online images are an ideal case study; they provide an accessible device for users to frame and comment on current events. Moreover, they serve as online tools for protesting government policies and actions.

Protests deal with different methods through which individuals and groups express their disapproval of a particular action or policy. In many cases, such protests are political, as people may express dissatisfaction with government policies through voting, letter writing, electoral campaigns, rallies, pickets, sit-ins and blockades (Chong, 2015; Soh, 2020). With the advent of social media, political protests now take place on different online platforms, including Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp (Al Zidjaly, 2017; Chiluiwa, 2018). Previous discourse studies on online protests investigate discursive strategies in online discourses produced by a Nigerian separatist group (Chiluiwa, 2018) and discursive choices used in internet memes that have been used to protest the dominant sphere of power of Morocco's three major corporate brands (Moussa et al., 2020). Others explore ideological representations in Nigerian WhatsApp memes used to protest government policies and actions during the Covid-19 pandemic (Unuabonah and Oyeboode, 2021) and appraisal choices used in online tweets to protest British Government ministers' behaviour during the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit (Hansson et al., 2022). Thus, these studies show how social media enhances the expression of disapproval of government policies in different sectors; however, they neglect online protests against government policies on university education. Thus, the present study explores the social representation of social actors involved in industrial actions by Nigerian public university lecturers on online platforms.

Multimodal discourse analysis

This study is within the field of multimodal discourse analysis, which examines the vital role multimodal texts play in the production, reproduction and transformation of social practices that capture the society in which people live (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen, 2003). The study leans on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar, which examines meaning in visual texts based on three metafunctions. These include the representational metafunction, which captures the participants and processes within the multimodal text; interactive metafunction, which deals with the relationship between the represented and interactive participants; and compositional metafunction, which focuses on how the visual and verbal elements in an image form cohesive ties. The representational metafunction bifurcates into narrative images that contain vectors and conceptual images that lack vectors. Narrative images comprise four processes: action, reaction, speech and mental, and conversion processes, while conceptual images consist of classificatory, analytical and symbolic processes. The interactive metafunction trifurcates into contact (demand or offer), social distance (intimate, social or impersonal) and attitude (involvement, detachment, viewer power). The compositional metafunction includes information value (given or new, ideal or real, important or less), salience (size, colour, tone, focus, perspective and repetition) and framing. All these are realised through semiotic resources to represent socially and culturally motivated meanings. Thus, this research addresses the following research questions: (a) how are social actors in the ASUU strike represented in online images? (b) Which socio-semiotic resources are used in the images?

Data and method

The data used for this paper comprise fifty purposively selected cartoons ($N=37$) and memes ($N=13$) on the 2022 ASUU strike, collected from diverse social media sites, such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, newspaper websites and other internet sites. The data collected included cartoons and memes shared between February and October 2022 since the strike began in February 2022 and ended in October 2022. The data were selected based on their inclusion of words such as 'ASUU', 'education' and 'strike'. Hence, they were deemed strong representatives of the 2022 ASUU strikes, each encompassing elements of representational, compositional or interactional meaning. The data collection method included a manual download of relevant cartoons and memes on the 2022 ASUU strike in Nigeria. These images were acquired and stored in easily accessible digital formats, including dedicated cloud-based repositories on personal mobile devices, email platforms and laptops. Subsequently, they were copied and pasted in a Word format to facilitate the cropping of the visual data. The collected data involved cartoons and memes. These collected data sources represent a valuable resource for understanding and analysing the multifaceted narratives and expressions related to the 2022 ASUU strike in Nigeria, as depicted through the lens of internet memes and cartoons shared online.

To address the two research questions, the 50 images were analysed and categorised according to the thematic representation of the social actors depicted. While the analysis remains qualitative, Table 1 presents the frequency of various representational patterns

Table 1. Frequency of representations in the 2022 ASUU strike images.

Representations	Tokens	Percentage (%)
Representation of students as victims	23	46
Representation of Government as perpetrators	13	26
Representation of ASUU as victims	8	16
Representation of ASUU as perpetrators	6	12
Total	50	100

observed within these images. Subsequently, two representative images from each category were selected to discuss the representation of social actors in the images using Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) framework of visual grammar.

Analysis and discussion

Previous studies have shown that cartoons often communicate messages through their humorous depiction and critique of real-life scenarios (Eko, 2010). The creation of meaning in both cartoons and memes occurs through a combination of two semiotic modes, verbal and visual, or through just the visual mode alone. Both modes are used in the selected images to convey the intended messages. The analysis of online images on the 2022 ASUU strike in Nigeria reveals that these images portray students and ASUU as victims and, in different contexts, ASUU as perpetrators, with the government often depicted as the instigators of the strike. The images utilise semiotic resources effectively to foreground the negative other-representation of the government and other stakeholders involved in the strike. Various rhetorical discursive devices, including irony, sarcasm, puns and contrast, are also utilised in the cartoons to enhance the delivery of these messages.

Representation of students as victims of the strike

The images portraying students as victims serve as a powerful means to convey the hardships endured by students during the 2022 ASUU strike. Figures 1 and 2, among others, exemplify these visuals that function as forms of protest against the strike in Nigerian universities. Through such imagery, the images draw attention to students’ plight and highlight the adverse consequences of the strike on their education and well-being, effectively using visual storytelling for advocacy and protest.

Figure 1 is a cartoon with a human-represented participant (RP), portrayed as a young pregnant woman lost in contemplation. The text accompanying the image suggests that the pregnant RP is a student who likely became pregnant during the 8-month ASUU strike. Thus, the visual text conveys the sense of despair experienced by students as a result of the strike. At the representational level, Figure 1 functions as a conceptual image without vectors in the text and is devoid of transactional elements. Instead, it engages in a classificatory process by depicting a specific group: (female) students of Nigerian universities affected by the 2022 ASUU strike. The image vividly illustrates the detrimental

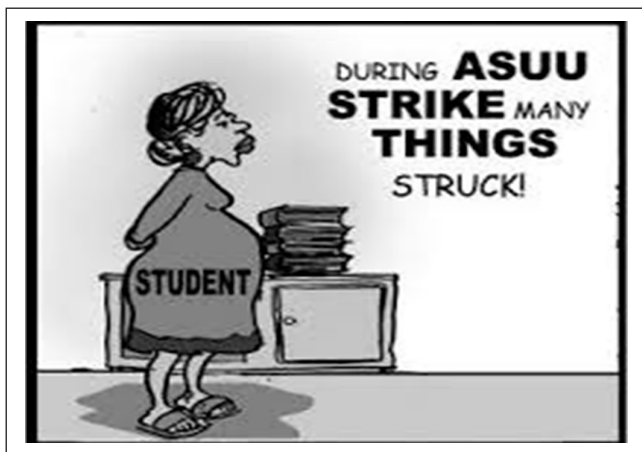


Figure 1. Many things Struck.

Source: https://web.facebook.com/vanguardngr/photos/a.153166651375106/8701511179873901/?type=3&nd_rdc=land_rdr.

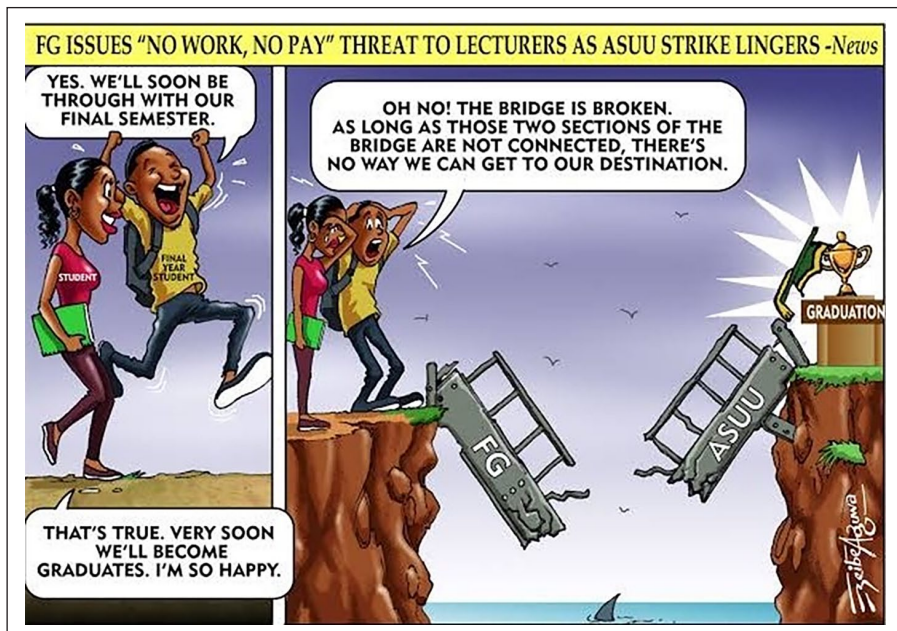


Figure 2. The bridge is broken.

impact of this strike on students. From the static portrayal of the RP, it can be inferred that her life, dreams and aspirations may have been momentarily put on hold. The absence of movement suggests a sense of stagnation, potentially indicating her inability to pursue further education due to her pregnancy.

Figure 1 is an offer image at the interactive metafunction level since the RP does not make direct eye contact with the viewers. Regarding social distance, the cartoon portrays a far social distance, as the entire figure of the lady, along with ample space around her, is visible to the viewers. This composition suggests a significant emotional and physical distance between the RP and the viewers. The visible space around her implies a sense of isolation or separation, indicating that viewers may not wish to associate themselves with the depicted situation of experiencing an unwanted pregnancy. At the level of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) compositional metafunction, the information focus of the visual text comprises both linguistic and pictorial elements. The pictorial information is on the left side, while the textual information is on the right. The Given information indicates that the pregnant lady is a student of a Nigerian university, while the New information reveals that the pregnancy results from the ongoing ASUU strike. This compositional arrangement effectively directs the viewers' attention to both aspects of the depicted scenario. Regarding salience, the visual component features foregrounded elements intended to attract attention and employ satirical strategies. The most salient information in the text is the RP, and the graphologically designed textual information is presented in bold and light font case letters. The verbal element, crafted in bold and normal font, foregrounds the strike's impact on university students. In this context, the word 'strike' could be interpreted as the act of hitting with a weapon, and the result of the strike is the word 'struck'. This choice of pun as a rhetorical strategy emphasises the negative portrayal of the ASUU strike, suggesting that ASUU is jeopardising students' future and career aspirations. Consequently, the strike disrupts dreams and distorts visions. Thus, the cartoonist utilises these semiotic resources to illustrate the harm caused by the ASUU strike, influencing the public's mental models regarding the adverse effects of the 2022 ASUU strike on Nigerian students. The victimisation of students is further depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2 presents a cartoon with two panels illustrating the impact of the 2022 ASUU strike on Nigerian university students' education. In the first panel, the RPs, Nigerian university students, rejoice as they anticipate completing their studies soon, in their final semester. However, the second panel portrays the RPs' joy being abruptly halted as they encounter a broken bridge, preventing them from reaching their destination. The RPs express their dismay at this unforeseen obstacle. The visual text functions as a narrative image at the representational metafunction level because the dialogue balloons, which serve as vectors, connect the RPs. This narrative image employs the speech and mental process depicting the contrast between students' desire to graduate on time and the time it takes to graduate eventually. Essentially, no student of federal or state universities in Nigeria can confidently assert that they graduated or will graduate according to the institution's approved graduation date. Therefore, the broken bridge symbolises the disruption of the academic calendar, resulting in delayed graduation for students. The image is an offer image at the interactive metafunction level since the RPs' gaze is not directed at the viewers, thus placing no demand on them. The visual text depicts university students' predicament due to the strike. Additionally, the text portrays a far social distance, as the entire bodies of the RPs and the surrounding space are noticeable to the viewers. This indicates minimal engagement with the viewers, who may wish to avoid being in the depicted situation of these students.

At the compositional level, the Given information comprises the RPs on the left, representing students of Nigerian public universities who are expected to graduate at the end of their course of study. The New information reveals that many dreams are truncated due to the strikes. Regarding salience, the broken bridge in the middle of the second panel symbolises the unresolved conflict between ASUU and FG. With the bridge broken, the students' dreams are shattered, and their future aspirations are truncated. Moreover, the linguistic element 'final year student', boldly written on the shirt of the male RP in the first panel, has been erased in the second panel, depicting the uncertainties that the ASUU strike brings as students are no longer certain of their graduation date once the strike commences. Similarly, the conditional clause 'as long as those two sections of the bridge are not connected. . .' implies that incessant strikes in the universities are jeopardising students' futures. The linguistic element 'FG issues "no work, no pay"' influences the mental models of the public to emphasise the negative other-presentation of the government and foregrounds their bad deeds.

A complex interplay of historical, cultural and societal factors in Nigeria influences the representation of students as victims in the cartoons. This representation highlights the historical legacy of student activism, cultural values emphasising education and systemic challenges within the educational system. These factors collectively underscore the urgency of addressing disparities in the educational system and shed light on the implications for the Nigerian educational landscape.

Government as perpetrators of the strike

Some images also capture the representation of the government as perpetrators of the 2022 ASUU strike, as analysed in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3 is a cartoon of two human RPs. The first RP is the image of the Federal Republic of Nigeria president, President Muhammadu Buhari. The second RP is a middle-aged man representing members of ASUU. The man appears starved and holds an empty plate typically used by beggars. He is half-dressed and barefoot, wearing a despondent expression as the first RP forcefully grips his hand, compelling him to applaud. The middle-aged man reluctantly claps despite his reluctance, evident from his facial expression. The discourse design of this text portrays the government's lack of empathy towards the plight of ASUU. At the representational metafunction level, the text functions as a narrative image as viewers can construct a story about the RPs depicted in the text. Additionally, participants in the visual text are connected by vectors – the bodies and limbs of the participants – capturing the action process. The RPs in the text form a narrative that illustrates the government's reluctance to resolve the 2022 ASUU strike. Consequently, the cartoon highlights the negative actions of the government. By instructing the RP to applaud him, the president expects the union to express gratitude to the government despite being treated unfairly, which is ironic. The linguistic element '... I have tried' further reinforces this notion. The declarative sentence 'clap for me' thus underscores the oppressive stance of the government and portrays ASUU as a victim of circumstances. This is reinforced by the declarative sentence, 'A country that does not know the value of education is not a country'. Overall, the cartoon conveys a message urging the government to act appropriately.

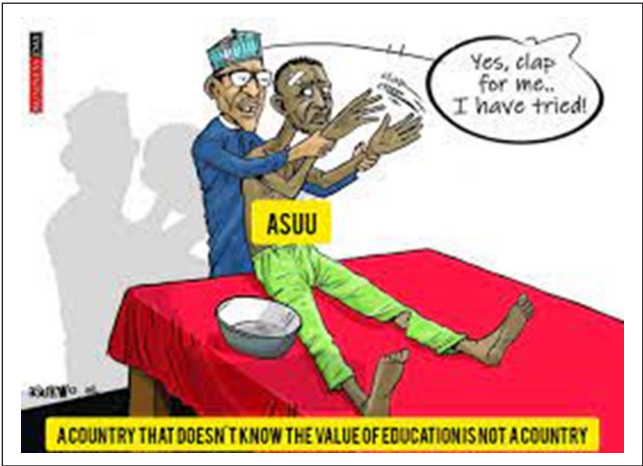


Figure 3. Clap for me.
Source: <https://businessday.ng/news/article/five-things-to-know-to-start-your-tuesday-24/>.

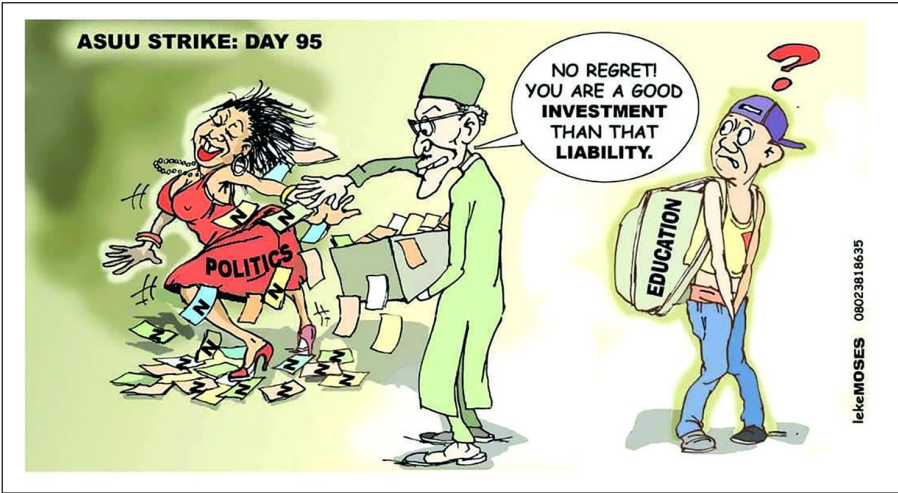


Figure 4. ASUU strike: day 95.
Source: https://web.facebook.com/vanguardngr/photos/a.153166651375106/8276412559050434/?type=3andlocale=ms_MYand_rdc=land_rdr.

At the interactive metafunction level, the visual text in Figure 4 operates as an offer image by providing information about the present situation in the country. It sheds light on ASUU’s struggles rather than the government’s actions. The choice of a medium angle suggests a sense of equality between the RPs and the interactive participants, indicating that the second RP and the viewers face similar challenges. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the medium angle displays equality between the RPs and the

viewer. In essence, the visual text uses the medium angle to inform the public that they could suffer a worse fate if they do not stand up and support ASUU's cause. At the compositional metafunction level, the Given information pertains to the conflict between the government and ASUU. In contrast, the New information reveals that the union is being coerced into applauding the government's ill-treatment. Thus, the declarative sentence 'clap for me' represents the New information as it depicts the government's forceful demand for gratitude from the academic sector. The real information is the verbal element, 'a country that doesn't know the value of education is not a country'. This statement underscores the dire state of the education sector, portraying lecturers as being reduced to beggars due to unfair treatment from the government.

Figure 4 also highlights the representation of the government as the perpetrators of the strike, featuring a cartoon with three human RPs. The first is a lady dressed in red and labelled 'politics', while the second RP is a caricature of Nigeria's former president, President Muhammadu Buhari. The lady is depicted dancing as the former president continuously sprays her with money. In contrast, the third RP, labelled 'education', stands a few steps away from the other two RPs, gazing at them with a confused and sad expression. Figure 4 serves as a satirical representation of the government's wasteful spending habits, financial irresponsibility, lack of accountability and misplacement of priorities. The visual text is a narrative image involving speech and mental process at the representational metafunction level. A vector, represented by the dialogue balloon, connects the RPs. The cartoon illustrates the Nigerian government's disregard for the education sector, suggesting a misalignment of priorities. This is highlighted as the president is depicted spraying money on the lady labelled 'politics'.

At the interactive metafunction level, Figure 4 is an offer image since the RPs do not directly gaze at the viewers. The first RP's eyes appear closed as she revels in the money being lavished on her by the second RP – the former president. The second RP's excitement is evident as he spends public funds on his political career and aspirations. This portrayal reflects the government's nonchalant attitude and unwillingness to heed the voices of the people. In contrast, the third RP is depicted gazing at the second RP in confusion. The visual text thus satirises the president and underscores the misdeeds of the Buhari-led administration, thereby influencing the public's mental models about the government's bad deeds. At the compositional metafunction level, the cartoon portrays two information systems. The Given information illustrates the government's neglect of the education sector, as indicated by the linguistic element, 'ASUU strike: day 95'. Despite the ongoing ASUU strike, the government appears unconcerned and chooses to allocate funds to politics instead, particularly as preparations for the 2023 general elections are underway. The New information presented is that if the government continues to misplace its priorities, education in Nigeria will deteriorate to mere tokenism. This is symbolised by the appearance of the RP labelled 'education', dressed in faded blue jeans and a yellow singlet, contrasting with the fully dressed president. The salience of the cartoon lies in the different shades of green used as the background colour, symbolising the Nigerian society. The colours of the RPs' attire are also significant; the RP labelled 'education' dressed in faded attire signifies the government's neglect of education. This notion is further emphasised by the declarative sentence, 'No regret! You are a better

investment than that liability', where the linguistic elements 'investment' and 'liability' are boldened, emphasising the negative deeds of the Nigerian government.

Representation of ASUU as perpetrators

In Figures 5 and 6, ASUU and its members are depicted as perpetrators, highlighting the dual role of their strike actions. While intended to capture the government's attention and address grievances, these strikes also have unintended negative consequences for students.

Figure 5 is a meme with one human RP – a female, popular Nollywood actress Funke Akindele. Through the linguistic elements in the meme, it is clear that various individuals are boasting about being the best football strikers, while the visual text humorously portrays ASUU as looking at them with contempt and asking who they are since ASUU considers itself as the best striker. Thus, the design of Figure 5 depicts ASUU as the perpetrator of the 2022 strike, suggesting pride in its repeated disruptions to the academic system. At the representational metafunction level, Figure 5 functions as a narrative image, as it creates a story about the participants in the visual text. The process in the image is primarily a speech and mental process, which presents the thoughts and declarations of the participants in the visual text. In this meme, famous footballers such as Zlatan Ibrahimović, Luis Suárez and Harry Kane are used as symbols of notable achievements. These figures have reached remarkable heights in their careers, setting records and being recognised as the best in their respective roles as football strikers. As such, they represent global and renowned success. However, the RP in the meme presents a



Figure 5. Who be these ones?

contrasting response with a facial expression of contempt, accompanied by the caption ‘Who be these ones?’ (a Nigerian Pidgin phrase meaning ‘Who are these ones?’). This dismissive expression reflects her apparent disregard for the notable achievements of the footballers, implying that they are insignificant compared to ASUU’s own ‘achievements’ regarding the disruption of academic activities through their consistent strikes. Therefore, the visual text depicts ASUU as perpetrators who derive pleasure from going on strike, without considering the effects on the educational sector. The choice of this RP is significant, as she is a popular Nollywood actress and a notable figure in the Nigerian movie industry who knows her craft well. Hence, the meme presents an ironic juxtaposition of ASUU, which appears to be glorifying the negative, in contrast to the RP’s positive contributions to the movie industry. This highlights the difference between the expected and the norm, with the meme consequently lampooning ASUU and suggesting that the union’s actions are counterproductive to the progress of education in Nigeria.

At the interactive metafunction level, the RP does not directly face the viewers, creating a visual offer rather than demanding anything from the interactive participant. In this regard, the RP’s facial expression plays a critical role in communicating ASUU’s attitude. Her gaze, directed slightly off-camera, combined with her furrowed brows and expression of contempt, suggests that ASUU is either unimpressed by or unaware of external concerns. The choice of the RP’s expression to represent ASUU reflects a dismissive attitude towards the footballers’ global success, creating an interesting juxtaposition. The meme employs pun as it plays on the word ‘striker’ in different contexts – football strikers in sports and ASUU strikes in the context of industrial actions. ASUU’s negative reaction, conveyed through the RP implies that the union takes pride in its role in leading strikes, further glorifying its disruptive influence. The contrast between the footballers’ recognised accomplishments and ASUU’s cynical response critiques ASUU’s role in the 2022 strike, suggesting that the union boasts about its effectiveness in halting academic progress while disregarding the negative consequences. This portrayal highlights ASUU’s inclination to glory in disruption, seemingly unconcerned with the achievements it undermines, symbolising its detachment from the detrimental effects on students’ academic futures. The type of social distance depicted in the image is that of far personal distance, as the head to waist of the RP is visible to the audience. This choice illustrates the emotional distance between ASUU and those affected by the 2022 strike. The meme portrays ASUU’s apparent lack of empathy and pride in disrupting academic activities. The footballers’ declarations become irrelevant in ASUU’s eyes, mirroring how students’ pleas and societal pressures are often ignored. This reinforces the view of ASUU as perpetrators who remain unmoved by the repercussions of their actions.

At the compositional metafunction level, the information value in the text includes the ideal information, represented by the linguistic elements at the top of the text, which contain the footballers’ arguments. Meanwhile, the real information is found in the linguistic element at the bottom, ‘Who be these ones?’ – a phrase that reflects ASUU’s dismissive attitude towards the footballers’ proclamations. This linguistic element highlights ASUU’s pride in going on strike. In terms of salience, the image of the RP is the most prominent element in the meme. The RP is depicted at home, wearing a head net with a red towel draped over her shoulder, suggesting she is about to take a bath. Her bright red towel and exaggerated facial expression make her the most visually striking



Figure 6. Last card.

Source: <https://punocracy.com/fellow-nigerian-students-asuun-as-you-read-this/>.

element, immediately drawing attention to her dismissive attitude. Her props – specifically the head net and towel – symbolise comfort and relaxation, indicating that ASUU is unbothered by external concerns and content with its state of inactivity during the 2022 strike. The use of colour further reinforces this message. The bold red towel contrasts starkly with the muted background and neutral text above, amplifying the sense of visual dissonance between ASUU's comfort and the footballers' self-promotion. Framing is also significant in this meme. The footballers' declarations are contained within a separate space, creating a distinct visual separation from the RP's response. This framing highlights the disconnection between ASUU and external achievements, suggesting that they operate in entirely different realities. The framing and colour choices work together to reinforce the overall message: while others are busy achieving great things, ASUU remains in its bubble, unconcerned with progress.

Figure 6 features two RPs. The first RP is a final-year student of a Nigerian university, while the second RP is a member of ASUU, dressed in an academic gown. The two RPs are depicted sitting at a table, engaged in a game of cards. During the game, the student RP drops his card, signalling the end of the game. However, the second RP, a lecturer and ASUU member, appears to enjoy the game and refuses to end it.

Consequently, the discourse design of Figure 6 portrays ASUU as perpetrators who seem unconcerned about the impact of the continuous strikes on Nigerian university students. At the representational metafunction level, Figure 6 functions as a narrative image. The RPs are connected by vectors, represented by dialogue balloons, which convey the speech and mental process. The cartoon suggests that the ASUU strike could have been avoided if ASUU had considered its effect on Nigerian university students.

At the interactive metafunction level, the visual text is an offer image since the RPs do not directly engage with the viewers through their gaze; thus, no demand is placed on the interactive participants. However, the RPs within the text are engaged in a mutual gaze, highlighting the contrast between ASUU's apparent enjoyment of the strike and its adverse impact on university students. The student RP expresses unhappiness and weariness due to the ongoing strike. He looks towards the second RP, pleading for the strike to be put on hold, yet the RP tagged 'ASUU' appears unperturbed by the student's distress. Consequently, the cartoon foregrounds ASUU's bad deeds, portraying them as indifferent to the detrimental effects of the strikes on students. Furthermore, the image is depicted from a far personal distance, allowing viewers to see the RPs from head to waist. This choice emphasises a personal relationship between the RPs within the text and the viewers. By bringing viewers closer to the depicted scene, the cartoon effectively portrays the plight of students affected by the strike, illustrating their predicament and emphasising the impact of ASUU's actions on their lives.

At the compositional metafunction level, the Given information is students' unhappiness regarding the delay caused by the strike, highlighting their frustration and desire for the strike to end. Conversely, the New information conveyed is that ASUU appears to enjoy the strike, contrary to the belief that ASUU is on strike on behalf of the students. Additionally, the linguistic element 'last card' followed by an ellipsis suggests that the students do not have the final say in the matter, indicating a sense of powerlessness. Moreover, the exclamation mark in ASUU's response emphasises their authority and ability to determine the course of the strike, implying that they have control over its continuation or cessation. Furthermore, 'pick two' is an argumentative strategy, underscoring ASUU's role in prolonging the strike and presenting them as the perpetrators of the ongoing disruption. This phrase suggests that ASUU can choose the terms of the strike, further accentuating their agency and responsibility in the situation.

Representation of ASUU as victims

Aside from being depicted as perpetrators, ASUU has also been portrayed as victims of the strike, despite their role in calling for it, as shown in Figures 7 and 8.

Figure 7 is a meme depicting a scene where a group of people force a cow into a small, rickety car. Despite the evident mismatch in size between the cow and the car, the human participants are determined to push the cow inside. The visual text comprises both human (the people) and non-human RPs (the car and the cattle). The scene symbolises the persistent efforts of the government to suppress ASUU without addressing their demands. The imagery conveys the idea that despite the challenges and impracticality of the situation, the government continues to exert pressure on ASUU, analogous to the forceful attempt to load the cow into the inadequate car. This highlights the ongoing struggle and suffering experienced by ASUU members and the government's reluctance to fulfil its commitments outlined in agreements and memoranda with the union. At the representational metafunction level, Figure 6 functions as a narrative image, illustrating an action process where the RPs are connected by vectors such as the car, their limbs and their bodies. The verbal elements in the meme focus on the government's persistent efforts to pressure ASUU to end the strike. These efforts included the implementation of



Figure 7. Forcing ASUU into the classroom.

policies aimed at compelling ASUU to halt the strikes. During the recent ‘eight-month strike by ASUU’, the government introduced a ‘no work, no pay’ policy and threatened legal action if the union did not return to work. Subsequently, the government took ASUU to court and demanded an end to the strike. These actions were intended to undermine the union and force compliance with government directives. In the meme, human participants are depicted forcibly attempting to load a large cow into a small car, symbolising the government’s coercive tactics. This imagery highlights the oppressive nature of the Nigerian government’s approach and attempts to suppress ASUU’s demands.

At the interactive metafunction level, the meme is an offer image since the RPs do not directly engage the viewers. Instead, the text provides information to the audience, highlighting the incongruity of the Federal Government’s efforts to halt ASUU’s strike without addressing its demands. The visual text portrays ASUU’s steadfastness and indicates that they will only relent when the government adequately meets their demands. Presented from an oblique angle, the meme offers viewers insight into the social world of the RPs and reveals ASUU’s victimisation by the Federal Government. Using a medium angle suggests equality between the RPs and the interactive participants.

At the compositional level, the Given information signals the degrading state of the Nigerian education sector, symbolised by the car on the left representing ASUU’s workplace – the classroom, which is known by viewers. The dilapidated state of the car, with a flat tyre, signifies the dismal condition of the Nigerian education sector. The New information conveyed is ASUU’s determination to persist despite the government’s persistent efforts to thwart their actions. The verbal element at the topmost part of the visual text is a progressive clause that underscores the union members’ struggle. This lexical choice aims to evoke an emotional response from the public, drawing attention to ASUU’s plight and the government’s apparent disregard for their demands, emphasising the negative actions of the Federal Government. Another salient element is the untarred



Figure 8. Beat him.

floor, the objects placed on the car and the setting resembling a cattle market. These details depict the unfavourable and unacceptable academic environment in Nigeria. The gerundive phrase, ‘forcing ASUU into the classroom’, is employed to highlight the victimisation of ASUU and underscore the negative portrayal of the government. The cow’s placement in the rickety car suggests potential suffocation due to the vehicle’s small size and poor ventilation. This metaphorically represents lecturers being compelled to teach in dilapidated buildings without adequate facilities. The immobility of the car implies that any attempt to move it would destroy both the cattle and the vehicle. Consequently, the meme conveys that there will be no progress in the education sector if the government continues disregarding these lecturers’ demands. Using the exclamation mark at the end of the linguistic expression ‘hiss!’ amplifies ASUU’s contempt for the government’s unfavourable policies. In the Nigerian socio-linguistic context, ‘hiss’ refers to the kiss-teeth oral gesture, commonly used to express contempt and derision (Unuabonah and Daniel, 2020).

The representation of ASUU as victims is also captured in Figure 8, which features three human RPs. The first RP is the Nigerian former Minister of Labour and Employment, Chris Nwabueze Ngige. In contrast, the second RP represents the Congress of University Academics (CONUA), a breakaway faction of ASUU officially registered in October 2022 by Ngige following the failure of the Federal Government of Nigeria and ASUU to resolve a 33-week labour strike that began in February 2022. The last RP represents ASUU. From the cartoon, it can be inferred that CONUA supports Ngige, the Minister of Labour, opposing ASUU. Figure 8 satirically illustrates the plight of ASUU due to the government’s failure to implement the union’s demands. At the representational metafunction level, the visual text is a narrative image, as viewers can construct a story by connecting the limbs between the RPs. These vectors enable the use of the action process, creating a narrative about the conflict among university lecturers due to the

strike and the government's reluctance to meet the union's demands. Instead of addressing the issues in the education sector, the government, represented by the education minister, promotes a counter-union to sow discord among university lecturers. According to James (2023), the Minister of Labour presented a certificate of registration, official gazette, and Trade Dispute Act to CONUA and urged the faction not to 'behave like ASUU'. Consequently, the cartoon highlights the government's unwillingness to provide a lasting solution to the issues raised by ASUU.

At the interactive metafunction level, the cartoon is an offer image because the RPs are not directly engaging with the viewers, placing no immediate demand on them. However, the cartoon conveys the plight of ASUU to the audience and illustrates the conflict between ASUU and its breakaway faction, CONUA. This conflict is evident in the imperative clause, 'beat him thorough. . .' which implies that the Minister has instigated conflict between ASUU and CONUA by openly supporting the latter. This tactic aims to divert ASUU's attention from the reasons for the strike and sow discord among university lecturers. Consequently, the image highlights the government's anti-welfare stance regarding the Nigerian education sector. At the compositional metafunction level, the Given information is that CONUA enjoys full government support, while the New information is ASUU's lack of government backing and neglect due to the ongoing strike. This neglect is depicted in the verbal element, '...he has not eaten for some months, and his shakara is much'. In this context, '*shakara*', a Yoruba term meaning 'pride', suggests that despite various attempts to silence them, ASUU has steadfastly maintained its stance, asserting the critical need for attention to the Nigerian education sector.

The study's findings underscore the significant impact of online images in addressing societal issues. These images effectively and humorously represent social ills, employing symbols and visual metaphors to simplify complex ideas and concepts. They convey meanings that words alone may struggle to express by distilling intricate issues into simple metaphors or symbols. In a country where freedom of speech is limited and citizens fear expressing their opinions due to the risk of incarceration, online images have emerged as a vehicle for truth-telling and expression.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the use of online images during the 2022 ASUU strike in Nigeria by examining how Nigerians use internet images to communicate their positions on the dysfunctional state of the educational sector. Situating the work in protest discourse, the analysis relies on discourse-oriented methods in examining how interactants utilise multimodal computer-mediated processes to generate and convey meaning as social action. The analysis underscores the role of visual semiotics in conveying complex socio-political messages, utilising elements such as composition, salience and symbolism to evoke emotional responses and provoke critical reflection. These visual representations provide a platform for public discourse, raising awareness about the urgent need for reforms and accountability within the Nigerian educational system.

This study significantly advances current research on cartoons and the larger academic field of memes and cartoons as tools of dissent in several key ways. Firstly, by

employing a multimodal discourse analysis approach, this study offers a comprehensive examination of online images within the context of industrial actions by Nigerian public universities. While previous research has explored cartoons and memes about socio-political issues, applying visual grammar to the study of memes provides an understanding of how visual and textual elements convey dissenting messages. Secondly, this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding digital activism and the role of social media in facilitating political expression and mobilisation. By focusing on online images as a form of digital dissent, the study highlights the unique affordances of digital platforms in amplifying marginalised voices and challenging dominant narratives.

Furthermore, this study adds to the growing literature on cartoons and memes as platforms for socio-political commentary within specific cultural and socio-economic contexts. By examining the portrayal of industrial actions in Nigerian public universities, this study sheds light on the intersections of education, labour rights and governance in Nigeria, offering insights into the socio-political dynamics of the region. By contextualising this analysis within the broader academic discourse on memes and cartoons as tools of dissent, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of visual communication in challenging authority, advocating for change and fostering social justice. However, this study is limited to 50 online images of the 2022 ASUU strike, without conducting interviews with the authors of the images and exploring public comments on the images discussed, constituting limitations of the study. Future research may explore other textual sources, such as online reader comments on the ASUU strike, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic's public discourse.

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