

Multimodal Humour in Nigerian Tiktok Protest Discourse During The #Endbadgovernance Movement

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Abstract

This study examines how Nigerian TikTok users employ multimodal resources in comment sections to construct humour within protest discourse during the August 2024 #EndBadGovernance movement. Focusing on the interaction of textual language and emojis, the research explores how humour mediates the expression of political critique, social frustration, and collective identity. Using qualitative content analysis informed by Multimodality and Relief Theory, the study analyses selected comments to reveal patterns of sarcastic Pidgin, phonetic stylisation, impersonation, exaggeration, and emoji-mediated affect. Findings show that humour in TikTok comments emerges through semiotic layering of text and emojis, allowing users to express dissatisfaction in socially and emotionally negotiable ways. The study demonstrates that TikTok comment sections are not mere reaction spaces but active sites of meaning-making where political critique, civic engagement, and national identity intersect. The findings have implications for digital activism, civic education, and the study of multimodal political communication in Nigeria.

Keywords: Multimodal humour, Tiktok, Nigeria, Protest, Endbadgovernance

Introduction

In recent years, Nigerians have increasingly used digital platforms to express dissatisfaction with governance, economic hardship, and social injustice, often mediating these expressions through humour (Yékú, 2022). Humour functions both as a coping mechanism and a tool for social critique, allowing users to articulate frustration while sustaining collective identity. This duality reflects the complex nature of Nigerian digital communication, where critique and national pride frequently coexist. The August 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests provide a significant context for examining these practices. TikTok videos documenting demonstrations and everyday experiences of economic hardship were accompanied by vibrant comment sections, where users employed multimodal humour, through text, sarcasm, irony, and emojis, to articulate protest, negotiate shared suffering, and foster communal resilience.

Across both Nigerian-produced and foreign-produced videos, recurring

patterns in comment sections reveal how humour mediates protest and engagement. Commenters combine Nigerian Pidgin, phonetic spelling, impersonation, and emojis to construct multimodal humour that critiques leadership while maintaining emotional manageability. Emojis function as stance markers, signaling irony, intensifying humour, or softening critique, enabling socially negotiable protest. These patterns are grounded in Nigeria's socio-cultural and linguistic context, where language practices articulate belonging, solidarity, and national consciousness (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Maine et al., 2019). Despite TikTok's growing prominence, little research has examined comment sections as interactive multimodal spaces for protest, particularly regarding how humour is realised through the interplay of text and emojis. This study addresses this gap by analysing Nigerian TikTok comment sections from the August 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests, highlighting how multimodal humour organises critique, fosters participation, and produces political engagement in everyday digital interaction.

Humour has long been recognised as a tool for social critique, emotional release, and socio-political engagement (Meyer, 2000; Morreall, 1983). Relief Theory posits that humour allows individuals to discharge psychological tension arising from stress, frustration, or social constraint, aligning with political satire, parody, and irony in online spaces (Freud, 1905/1960). Humour thus functions as a mechanism for regulating affect, negotiating social relationships, and reframing critique in emotionally manageable ways. In the Nigerian context, humour plays a central role in mediating socio-political commentary, particularly in settings characterised by governance dissatisfaction, economic hardship, and civic activism (Adegoju, 2022; Onwubiko, 2022). Studies of online movements such as #EndSARS and #Obidient show that humour and irony allow participants to critique leadership, navigate risk, and sustain solidarity while avoiding direct confrontation (Awopetu & Chilwa, 2023; Adebomi, 2025). Humour is often

embedded in local cultural practices, drawing on shared knowledge, oral performance traditions, and linguistic creativity.

Multimodality theory highlights that meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources, including text, emoji, stylized spelling, and layout (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, 2009). Social media platforms such as TikTok provide spaces where these modes converge. Comment sections allow users to combine textual language, emojis, phonetic spellings, narrative framing, and impersonation to construct humour that communicates social, emotional, and political meaning simultaneously (Bateman, 2014; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Olateju, 2025). Emojis function as stance markers, intensifying irony, signalling affect, and guiding interpretation.

Despite this scholarship, limited research has examined TikTok comment sections in Nigeria as interactive multimodal spaces. In particular, few studies explore how users integrate text, emoji, and culturally grounded linguistic resources to produce humour that mediates protest and manages emotion. This study

addresses this gap by investigating multimodal humour in Nigerian TikTok comments during the August 2024 #EndBadGovernance movement.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, using qualitative content analysis to explore humour in Nigerian TikTok comment sections during the August 2024 #EndBadGovernance movement. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how text and emojis interact to create multimodal humour that conveys socio-political critique. The study is guided by Multimodality, which examines how meaning emerges through the interplay of verbal and visual resources (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, 2009), and Relief Theory, which frames humour as a mechanism for emotional release, tension management, and collective coping in response to political frustration (Freud, 1905/1960).

The population comprises TikTok comments posted by Nigerian users in response to protest-related videos. Purposive sampling was used to select

four videos, two Nigerian-produced and one foreign-produced with high Nigerian engagement and screenshots of comments were extracted for analysis based on their humorous content, emoji use, and evaluative stance. Data were manually collected from TikTok, preserving text, emojis, and stylistic features. Comments were analysed using qualitative content analysis, focusing on recurring patterns of multimodal humour and protest expression. Multimodality informed the analysis of how textual and visual cues combine, while Relief Theory guided the interpretation of humour as an affective resource that allows users to critique governance, release tension, and participate in digitally mediated civic discourse.

Analysis

Humour as a Multimodal Resource in TikTok Comment Sections

Humour in TikTok comments is not confined to text but emerges from the interaction of language and visual cues. Nigerian Pidgin, phonetic spellings, impersonation of political figures, and narrative exaggeration combine with

emojis to produce humour that is culturally grounded and socially intelligible. For example, one comment references electoral bribery:

This comment employs Nigerian Pidgin



shey people wey collect mini bag of rice during election as bribe don chop am finish... una never see anything 😏

2024-8-1 Reply



(NP) to construct humour through sarcasm, cultural reference, and emoji-mediated stance-taking. At the level of textual content, the speaker draws on a familiar electoral practice in Nigeria where voters are enticed with small incentives such as bags of rice. The rhetorical particle “shey” introduces a teasing, interrogative tone that presupposes shared background knowledge among readers. By asking whether those who collected a “mini bag of rice” have already finished eating it, the commenter creates humour through ironic contrast between a temporary reward and its implied consequences.

Humour is realised through metaphorical framing and exaggeration. The “mini bag of rice” operates as a culturally recognisable symbol, while the clause “una never see anything” (“you have not

seen anything yet”) projects future difficulty in an overstated, comic manner. This hyperbolic phrasing converts a serious socio-political reference into playful ridicule. Through

qualitative content analysis, the humour here lies in how evaluation is embedded in joking language rather than in direct accusation.

From a multimodal perspective, humour is co-constructed through the interaction between text and the smirking emoji 😏. The emoji signals knowingness and ironic detachment, visually cueing readers to interpret the utterance as teasing rather than literal warning. While the verbal text introduces sarcasm, the emoji intensifies this stance by adding an affective layer of mockery. Meaning is therefore produced through the alignment of verbal irony and visual attitude, creating a layered humorous effect.

Applying Relief Theory, the joke-like framing enables the speaker to channel emotional tension into light, playful expression. Instead of presenting hardship in a solemn way, the commenter

reshapes it into ridicule and comic anticipation. The humorous construction provides emotional release through exaggeration and irony, allowing the experience to be voiced in a less heavy and more interactionally engaging form. Overall, the comment demonstrates that humour in Nigerian TikTok comment sections is realised multimodally through culturally grounded references, ironic textual design, and expressive emoji use. By combining sarcastic Pidgin phrasing with visual stance markers, the commenter produces humour that emerges from semiotic interaction rather than from text or emoji alone.

Another comment impersonates former President Buhari through Hausa-influenced phonetic spelling:



Buhari -: walahi I don lap taya Kai 😂. dem
kwamplain por my gwavament walahi.
Tinuvu I don dey show una shege Kai 😂😂
😂 madala

2024-8-1 Reply



phonetic pattern, such as “lap” for laugh, and “taya” for tired. This orthographic choice is not accidental error but a stylised performance of speech, allowing the commenter to dramatise how a Hausa-dominant speaker might articulate English. Through this stylisation, political commentary is turned into a comic vocal performance rather than a neutral statement.

At the level of textual meaning, the comment stages an imagined utterance by Buhari. By writing “Buhari -:” and then narrating what Buhari would supposedly say, the commenter performs political voice impersonation. Buhari is presented as laughing and claiming that people complained during his own

This comment realises humour through phonetic stylisation, role impersonation, and multimodal stance-taking. The speaker constructs a mock voice for a former Nigerian president by writing English through a Hausa-influenced

administration, but that Tinubu has now “shown” them greater hardship. This construction transforms governance into a humorous comparison between regimes, framed not as analytical argument but as playful mock speech.

Through qualitative content analysis, the text can be interpreted as humorous political storytelling, where leadership experience is refracted through parody.

From a Multimodality perspective, humour emerges from the interaction between stylised text and laughing emojis. The commenter writes English through a Hausa-influenced phonological pattern, producing spellings such as “lap” for laugh, “taya” for tired, “kwamplain” for complain, “por” for for, and “gwavament” for government. These non-standard spellings visually represent an accented voice and turn the comment into a performative script rather than ordinary writing. Readers are invited to “hear” Buhari’s imagined speech, making the political critique sound embodied and culturally grounded rather than abstract. The first laughing emoji (😂) marks Buhari’s imagined laughter, cueing readers to treat the line as comic imitation rather than factual report. The repeated emojis (😂😂😂) after the reference to Tinubu visually intensifies the performance, converting socio-economic suffering into exaggerated spectacle. The emojis do not merely decorate the text; they shape how the phonetic spellings and impersonation are interpreted,

guiding the reader toward a playful, teasing stance. Together, the stylised orthography and emojis co-construct humour across modes, blending visual form, imagined voice, and affect to transform political evaluation into humorous digital performance.

Applying Relief Theory, the humour in the comment operates as emotional release from political fatigue. By making Buhari and Tinubu appear to laugh about citizens’ suffering, the commenter externalises frustration through parody rather than direct anger. The joke allows users to process disappointment by transforming it into comic performance. Instead of expressing despair, the commenter releases tension through imitation and laughter, making hardship psychologically manageable and socially shareable.

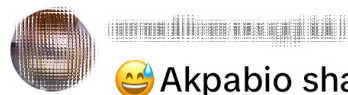
Overall, this comment demonstrates that humour in

Nigerian TikTok comment sections is multimodally realised through phonetic stylisation, political voice impersonation, and emoji-based affect. By performing how leaders might “laugh” at public suffering, the commenter converts socio-political

frustration into a humorous spectacle, enabling emotional coping and collective recognition within digital interaction.

Humour as a Mediating Resource for Protest Expression

Humour mediates protest by softening critique while sustaining political meaning. For instance:



Humour enters the interaction through the smiling-with-sweat emoji (😓) placed at the beginning of the comment. This emoji typically indexes nervous laughter, awkwardness, or ironic discomfort rather than joy. Its position before the textual accusation reframes how the critique is received. Instead of opening with

This comment expresses political protest through a combination of direct condemnation and humour-mediated tone control. At the level of textual content, the commenter addresses Akpabio by name and repeatedly uses the evaluative phrase “shame on you” and “shame on this administration,” constructing a strong moral critique of political leadership. The protest stance is explicit: the speaker rejects the legitimacy and ethical standing of Nigerian politicians in the context of citizens suffering while leaders “eat.” Without mediation, such wording could read as purely angry or aggressive.

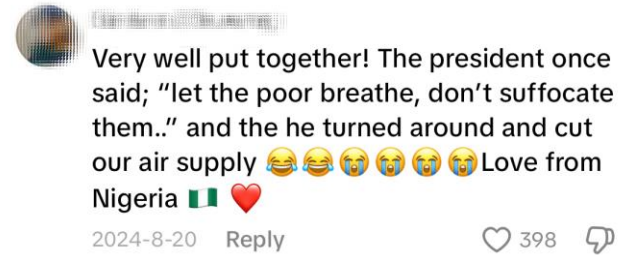
hostility, the emoji signals a stance of ironic resignation and controlled frustration. The commenter appears to say, in effect, “this situation is so bad it is laughable,” transforming moral outrage into a socially intelligible, shareable form of protest. From a multimodal perspective, the emoji and text work together to mediate affect. The text performs accusation, while the emoji regulates its emotional force. The 😓 does not cancel the protest meaning but softens its delivery, allowing the critique to circulate without escalating into overt aggression. In this way, humour functions as a buffer

between anger and expression. The commenter is still protesting, but through a mode that balances seriousness with ironic distance.

Through the lens of Relief Theory, the humour in this comment operates as an emotional release mechanism. Faced with political hypocrisy, where leaders trivialise protest while citizens struggle, the commenter converts frustration into ironic laughter. Rather than shouting, the speaker exhales tension through the emoji, signalling psychological coping as much as political resistance. The humour enables the user to discharge stress while still maintaining a critical voice within the public sphere.

Overall, this comment demonstrates how humour mediates protest in TikTok comment sections by shaping the tone of political critique. The protest message remains strong, but humour, realised through emoji use, regulates emotional intensity, makes condemnation socially negotiable, and allows resistance to be expressed without direct hostility. In this way, humour operates as a communicative strategy that transforms

anger into participatory, digitally manageable protest discourse.



This comment mediates protest through ironic quotation, metaphorical framing, and multimodal emotional layering. At the textual level, the commenter begins with affirmation (“Very well put together!”), aligning with the video before moving into critique. The quoted statement attributed to the president, “let the poor breathe, don’t suffocate them,” is contextualised ironically. By following it with “and then he turned around and cut our air supply,” the commenter constructs a metaphor in which economic policies are framed as literally depriving citizens of air. This figurative move transforms abstract governance failure into a bodily, experiential image, intensifying protest meaning while maintaining expressive creativity.

Humour mediates this critique through the strategic deployment of laughter and crying emojis 😂😂😂😂😂😂. The laughing emojis introduce

mockery, signalling that the political contradiction is being treated as absurd rather than only offensive. The crying emojis, however, immediately follow, layering pain onto the humour. This sequence creates emotional ambivalence: the commenter laughs at the irony but simultaneously mourns its consequences. Rather than presenting protest as rage, the multimodal design converts grievance into an emotionally complex performance that readers can recognise, share, and respond to.

From a multimodal perspective, meaning is co-constructed through the interaction of quotation, metaphor, punctuation, and emoji strings. The textual irony exposes hypocrisy, while the emojis regulate the emotional temperature of the protest. The alternation between 😏 and 🥲 visually enacts the tension between humour and suffering, showing how protest is not communicated in a single emotional register but through blended affective cues. The Nigerian flag 🇳🇬 and heart ❤️ at the end further anchor the protest within a framework of national attachment rather than hostility, signalling that critique is motivated by care rather than rejection.

Applying Relief Theory, the humour in the comment operates as a coping mechanism for political and economic stress. Laughing at contradiction allows the commenter to momentarily release frustration, while crying emojis acknowledge the persistence of hardship. The humour does not eliminate suffering but manages it emotionally, enabling users to articulate disappointment without collapsing into despair or aggression. In this way, humour becomes a strategy for sustaining participation in protest discourse under conditions of strain.

Overall, this comment demonstrates how humour mediates protest by transforming political hypocrisy into ironic spectacle and emotional performance. Through quotation, metaphor, emoji layering, and national symbolism, protest is expressed in a way that balances ridicule, pain, and attachment, making political critique socially intelligible and affectively manageable within TikTok's multimodal environment.

The analyses in the preceding section show that humour mediates protest in Nigerian TikTok comment sections by transforming anger, disappointment, and

resistance into emotionally negotiable expressions. Rather than functioning solely as confrontation, protest is shaped through irony, metaphor, and emoji-based affect that allow users to criticise governance while sustaining participation and social alignment. Within this set of comments, however, one instance also includes an explicit expression of affection for Nigeria, even while sustaining political criticism. This moment signals that protest discourse on TikTok can coexist with emotional attachment to the nation. The next section therefore examines how national pride and collective identity are articulated within TikTok comment sections during the #EndBadGovernancemovement.

Results

This study examined how Nigerian TikTok users employed multimodal resources in comment sections during the August 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests. Focusing on the interaction between textual language and emojis, the research explored how humour within protest discourse, was constructed. Using qualitative content analysis informed by

Multimodality and Relief Theory, the study addressed four research questions. The major findings of the study are summarised as follows:

1. **Humour in TikTok comments is multimodally realised.**

Humour in Nigerian TikTok comment sections does not reside in text alone but emerges from the interaction of language and visual resources. Commenters draw on Nigerian Pidgin, Hausa-influenced stylization, exaggeration, metaphor, impersonation, and narrative framing, which are intensified by emoji use. Emojis function as stance markers that regulate tone, signal irony, amplify affect, and guide interpretation.

2. **Local linguistic resources shape humorous meaning.**

Users creatively exploit Nigerian Pidgin, phonetic spellings, and mock-voice performances to construct culturally grounded humour. Stylised orthography and impersonation transform political commentary into performative scripts,

enabling users to “voice” leaders and everyday experiences in ways that are recognisable and socially shareable within Nigerian digital culture.

3. Humour mediates the expression of protest.

Rather than presenting protest only as confrontation, commenters use humour to regulate emotional intensity. Through irony, metaphor, and emoji framing, users express dissatisfaction with governance while softening aggression and sustaining participation. Humour allows anger, disappointment, and resistance to be communicated in emotionally manageable and socially negotiable ways.

Overall, the study fills a gap in scholarship by foregrounding TikTok comment sections as multimodal, interactional spaces where Nigerians construct humour within protest discourse.

Conclusion

This research set out to examine how Nigerian TikTok users construct multimodal humour within protest discourse, during the #EndBadGovernance movement.

By analysing the interaction between textual language and emojis through qualitative content analysis, the study demonstrates that TikTok comment sections are not merely reaction spaces but active sites of meaning-making in digitally mediated protest discourse. The findings show that Nigerian users creatively mobilise linguistic and visual resources to articulate socio-political experience.

Guided by Multimodality, the analysis reveals how meaning is produced through the interplay of stylised text, emoji use, and interactional positioning. Humour functions not as distraction but as a communicative strategy which, as explained by Relief Theory, enables users to release tension and transform frustration into narratable, shareable, and emotionally regulated expression. Protest is shaped through irony, metaphor, and emoji-based stance rather than through direct hostility alone, allowing users to

participate while managing emotional strain.

TikTok comment sections therefore emerge as complex environments where critique, and solidarity, intersect within everyday digital interaction. In conclusion, the study establishes TikTok comment sections as significant multimodal arenas for contemporary Nigerian protest communication, demonstrating how everyday users employ humour, to negotiate governance, hardship, and national identity in digital spaces.

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