



Research Article

Volume 24 Issue 3 - December 2022  
DOI: 10.19080/JGWH.2022.24.556136

J Gynecol Women's Health

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# Analysis of Iconographic Effect of Visual Communication Genre on Covid-19 in Nigeria



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**Submission:** November 25, 2022; **Published:** December 08, 2022

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## Abstract

The study focused on the analysis of iconographic effect of visual communication genre on Covid-19 in Nigeria. It established how cartoons were used as a journalistic genre, in simple, sorted and catchy formats, which appealed to the human sense to globally communicate to the public via social media platforms, the threat posed by the Coronavirus pandemic. The Visual Rhetoric was used as a theoretical framework. The study revealed that social media contributed to citizen engagement, served as a medium through which people could express their views on Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, and through the same media, cartoons, as a tool for the fight against Covid-19, were used to attack, share sensitive information, pull a prank, and derail a topic. It revealed that Facebook constituted a major platform that was used to campaign against Covid-19 in Nigeria, including the use of cartoons. The study also revealed that cartoonists engaged visual elements at the representational or descriptive and analytical levels to stimulate audience interest in their works. The study concludes that cartoons on Covid-19 in Nigeria are rhetorical objects that were used, not just for creating awareness on the threat posed by the Coronavirus, but by extension or symbolism, stimulating tools for lampooning the excesses of the political class. Therefore, cartoons, which comprise textual elements and visual imageries, are significant in stimulating the interest of the readers, both in descriptive and analytical communication and should be used for such a purpose.

## Introduction

Iconographic analysis is an interpretation of the content of images like cartoons. The subjects normally depict particular compositions and details used, including other elements that are distinct from artistic style. Cartoon is a journalistic genre presented in simple, sorted and catchy formats, which appeal to the human sense and consequently allow for quick reception of the messages communicated. Cartoons constitute a medium through which people are informed, educated and entertained by hilariously presenting societal happenings. Cartoons are constructed in a satirical form to discuss issues in the public domain. Such cartoons expose social ills in a strategic way by conveying messages of deep meaning magnitude.

Given the importance of cartooning, it has been described as one of the most significant means of propagating and advocating on the issue of Covid-19 in Nigeria [1]. Newspaper cartoons throughout Nigerian history reveal that they have served as unique windows useful in understanding local and national issues. Using imagery, metaphor, symbolism and other rhetorical devices, a cartoonist defines the Covid-19 situation and attempts to

interpret them visually in a way that is both amusing and thought-provoking [2].

Therefore, cartoons play a significant role in virtually every society. The relevance of this genre of visual commentary has been the subject of considerable scholarly exertion in recent times. On the historical development of cartooning in Africa, scholars like Medubi [3] and Jimoh [4] agree that the emergence of this genre has been influenced by a need to have an alternative platform like editorial cartoons in expressing opinion in the face of government or regime clampdown on opposition. Hence, Olaniyan [5] and Jimoh [4] in relation to the level of iconicity in their studies discussed the stylistic characteristics of the language of cartoons in some Nigerian newspapers.

Cartoons are a significant element of media communication. Thus, over the years, they have presented the public with visualized versions of editorial comments. Indeed, the mass media perform major roles in defining social issues as their representations constitute ways of knowing, articulating and interpreting different facets of the society, and thus ways of exerting knowledge and

power in the society. The ability of cartoons to express complex issues in a single graphic metaphor, as well as having access to a variety of literate and illiterate audiences, suggests that they constitute a compelling force for the pandemic [6-7].

Within this context, the outbreak of Covid-19 in Nigeria witnessed a digitalized scene of unprecedented campaigns within and outside Nigeria. People engaged in using social media to create awareness on the issue of Covid-19. The majority of the people used Facebook to campaign against the Covid-19 pandemic that created a global health crisis. In this direction, the use of iconicity or cartoons was imperative in the fight against the pandemic. Cartoons were used to communicate on serious issues regarding the virus in a humorous way. Many citizens were enlightened through this platform on the seriousness of the pandemic. Given the importance of technological advancement and the era of social media, it was easy to spread the cartoons on Covid-19 among people. Considering the imperativeness of cartoons in sharing information on Covid-19, it is important to interrogate the extent to which it influences people. This study is motivated based on the gap identified by Gwandu [8] that since there are little or no sufficient empirical studies that addressed the issue, such the academic gap will be filled by ironically exploring the subject of Covid-19 to the strengthening of the theory, methodology and the general knowledge base on the subject. Within this context, there is a need to venture into an academic study to examine the visual communication genre of Covid-19 in Nigeria.

### Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study was to carry out an analysis of iconographic effect of visual communication genre on Covid-19 in Nigeria. To achieve this, the specific objectives were to:

- a) examine cartoons as a platform for sharing sensitive ideas
- b) ascertain if cartoons on Covid-19 are used as an attack tool
- c) investigate if cartoons are used as a pull prank on Covid-19 and
- d) find out if cartoons on Covid-19 are used to derail a topic.

### Literature Review

A cartoon is a two-dimensional, non-realistic or stylized drawing or painting intended for satire, caricature or humor [9]. Cartoons are an amalgam of images (the symbols) and captions (the written word) that are simplified into a visual form and presented in an easily accessible medium of mass communication, such as newspapers, magazines, web and books. Types of cartoons include gag cartoons, comic strips, animated cartoons and political cartoons or editorial cartoons [4].

Msughter [10,11] examines internet memes as a unique form of narrative to help avert the widespread of Covid-19 in Nigeria.

The study captures and highlights the usage of photograph memes on Covid-19. The study employs semiotic and qualitative content analysis methods. The study found that Internet memes on Covid-19 explored issues that contained visual metaphors aimed at establishing what Nigerians are passing through as well as stimulating government participation. Again, social media usage in connection with the pandemic in Nigeria is by creation, uploading, and sharing of internet memes on Covid-19. The study established that internet memes served as an avenue for direct communication, which contributes to creating awareness of Covid-19.

Kurfi and Msughter [12] used Semiotic Analysis as well as Text and Textual Analysis to study internet memes of men's dance competitions in Benue State. The study used Cultural Populism Theory and Visual Rhetoric Theory. Purposive sampling was used to select social media and photos for analysis. The study revealed that men's dance has contributed to promoting the popular culture of the Tiv people. The study also revealed that men have contributed to the development of the culture both at home and abroad. This means that internet memes play a fundamental role in creating awareness on issues that are of public interest [10].

However, empirical studies on the role of the cartoon in developing countries like Nigeria, and the usage of language have been done using in-depth interviews, surveys and content analysis. A study carried out by Bello and Aleshinloye [2] hold that cartoonists could be regarded as significant contributors to the development of Nigerian media, particularly the newspapers. The study found that about two-thirds of the readers identified cartoons as one of their reasons for purchasing newspapers. Similarly, the study by Sani [13] maintains that cartoons help to set the tone of public discussions on issues of national concern.

Scholars like Sani and Abdullah [14] have also identified cartoons as a potent multimodal genre comprising linguistic and nonlinguistic devices to convey meaningful messages. The authors argue that the Nigerian cartoons adopt a specific pattern of depicting substantive issues reflecting current sociopolitical issues in the Nigerian context. These substantive issues constitute 80 percent of the total cartoons sampled. Additionally, Sani and Abdullah [14] conducted another study on cartoons that cartoons constitute a vital social discourse that mediates media and society, thereby contributing to political communication, social debate and commentary.

Olaniyan [15] examines cartooning as a weapon of nationalism during colonial rule in Nigeria. Exploring Akinola Lasekan's cartoons as a pivot, the study examines the evolution of Lasekan's oeuvre during the struggle for self-rule. Adejuwon and Alimi [16] examine cartoons as illustrations of the political process in Nigeria. The study gives a brief history of Nigerian cartoons and traced it to Akinola Lasekan, as most previous studies on Nigerian cartooning do. Ola [17] criticizes the seeming exclusion of cartoons in African visual-culture scholarship and explores several forms of visual satire in traditional and contemporary Yoruba society, such

as sculpture, political cartoons and photography. Ola argues that these visual forms are cultural materials that cannot be denied attention as they are culturally constructed.

Sani [13] observed that visual metaphor is powerful rhetoric, which can be creatively utilized to provide a better means of communicating important messages because it strongly appeals to the mind of the readers more precisely and succinctly than verbal expressions. Ogbo and Nuhu [18] in their study found that the images of corruption, official responsibility, political failure and brutality are dominantly presented. They concluded that the newspaper cartoons have used the instrument of satire to project what they perceived to be the dominant ills of the society.

### Theoretical Framework

This study used Visual Rhetoric Theory postulated by George Campbell in the 18th century. The basic assumption of the theory is that images or cartoons are used to communicate issues in the public domain. The theory encompasses the skill of visual literacy and the ability to analyze images for their form and meaning. Within the theoretical lens, the use of image to communicate is fundamental as these images help in forming the case or arguing the point that the writer formulates. Visual rhetoric encompasses how people arrange segments of visual text on electronic media to comment on sensitive issues. Visual rhetoric can also be used to select different fonts, contrastive colors and graphs, among other elements, to shape visual rhetoric text. One of the ideas one can apply, when analyzing a visual text is to look for its significant meaning.

Gwandu [8] and Msughter, *et al.* [6,7] believed that in the application of visual rhetoric, the meaning should be deeper than the literal sense that a visual text holds. In this direction, there is a need to dissect a visual text to understand the meaning behind an image or text. As such, analyzing a text that includes a photo, painting or even cartoon of the bold eagle with additional written words would bring to minds the conceptions of strength and freedom rather than merely a conception of a bird.

Therefore, the nexus between the theory and the study is that in the process of creating an iconographic image, the rhetorical choice that are made in coloring, shaping or object placement are fundamental to the overall success of a cartoon. In the case of using cartoons to share information on Covid-19, such cartoons are constructed in a comical way using visual elements to express opinion or ideas on the Covid-19 pandemic by Nigerian citizens.

### Materials and Methods

The method is based on qualitative method, and it relies on secondary sources of data. Cartoon images connote multiple interpretations. Thus, the study on cartoons is accomplished by iconographic analysis within the visual and social semiotic theoretical frameworks. The iconographic analysis is predicted on the interpretation of the content of images: the subjects depicted the particular compositions and details used, including other

elements that were distinct from artistic style. The population of the study comprised cartoons on visual genre in Nigeria on Covid-19. These cartoons were sourced from social media platforms like Facebook. Eight cartoons were analyzed for this study. However, four are presented in this report, for in-depth qualitative analysis.

The cartoons were selected and analyzed based on Covid-19 themes, cartoons embedded with visual imageries, and less textual elements of cartoons. These criteria are dictated by the objectives and analytical orientations of the study. Secondary data for the study comprised literary materials underpinning the focus of the study. The analysis of data is inductive and inferences were drawn from an in-depth observation of the textual and visual elements embedded in cartoon representations within their contexts of production.

The cartoons were selected because different social media platforms were used to disseminate information on Covid-19. Notwithstanding, Facebook was the most use channel to campaign against the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. This limited the study to consider only cartoons on Facebook within the period of the study.

### Results and Discussion

Cartoons were used in Nigeria to create content and awareness on Covid-19 in the following ways:

#### **R01: Cartoons as Platform for Sharing Sensitive Ideas on Covid-19 in Nigeria**

Based on Figure 1, social media users find cartoons handy in the dissemination of sensitive issues like the economy of the nation. Some of the cartoons were produced by newspapers platform and shared on social media like Facebook. Due to the humorous nature of cartoons, most citizens prefer to use cartoons in discussing serious or sensitive issues. For example, the images in the picture depict the scene of how Covid-19 is affecting the country's business of crude oil globally, and the need to fight it.

Therefore, Ogbo and Nuhu [18] concluded that the cartoons have used the instrument of satire to project what they perceived to be the dominant ills of society. As such, such cartoons are normally produced to discuss sensitive issues and economy is one of such issues. Again, considering the satirical nature of cartoons, even when they are used to discuss sensitive ideas, people subject them to mere images that are created, or constructed for entertainment purposes. Contrary to this view, Adejuwon and Alimi [16] hold that cartoons could be regarded as a significant contribution in discussing sensitive issues that could affect the development of a nation.

Again, as shown on Figure 2, another cartoon was created to discuss the issue of the economy of the nation. The cartoon was published by Daily Trust but went viral on social media like Facebook. The cartoon shows how the citizens were doing their best to see that Covid-19 did not cripple the small businesses

in Nigeria. Therefore, the cartoon serves the study goal as it was created to share information on sensitive issues like the economy of the country. Within the context of the adopted theory, the postulation of the Visual Rhetoric is apt in this context as

cartoons were created to depict these scenes. There is also a nexus between the study and the adopted theory because images were constructed to examine the Covid-19 pandemic in a comical way.

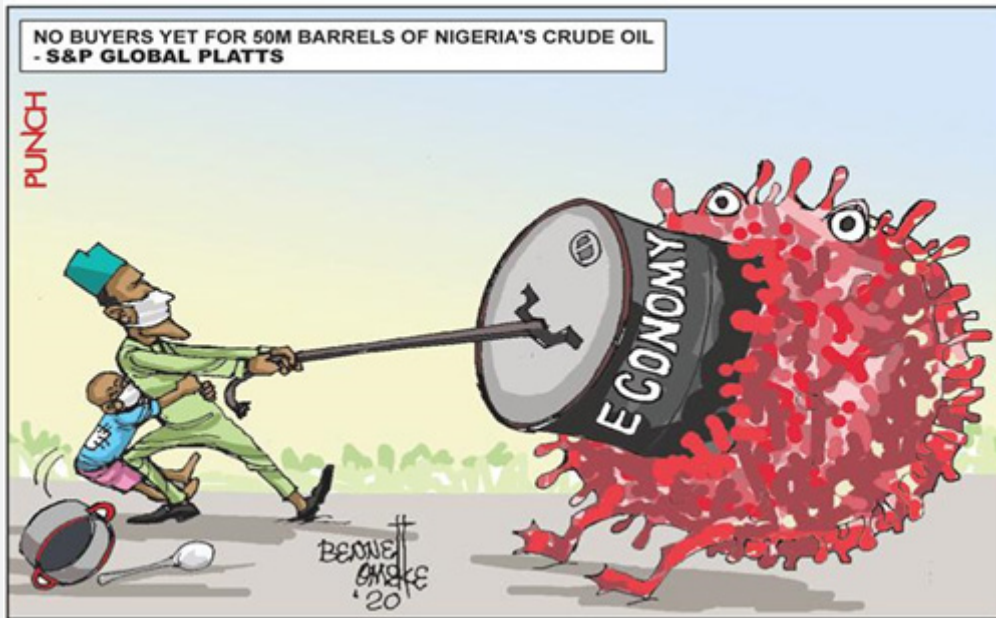


Figure 1: Cartoons as Platform for Sharing Sensitive Ideas on Covid-19 Source: (Facebook, 2020).



Figure 2: Cartoons as Platform for Sharing Sensitive Ideas on Covid-19 Source: (Facebook, 2020).

On Figure 3, another cartoon was the one created to show how people could die because of the economic hardship occasioned by the virus. Empirical literature by Msughter *et al.*, [6,7] shows that

about 300 people that died during this period had nothing to do with the virus. Rather, hunger was the major problem that led to the escalation in the numbers of death as shown in the cartoons.

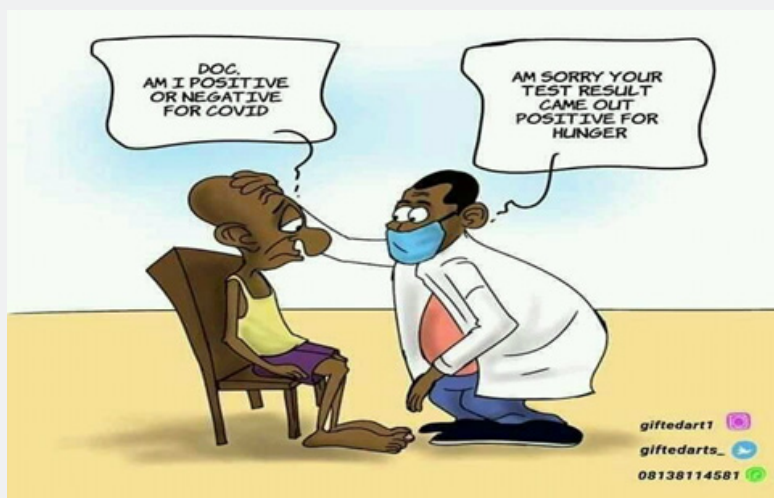


Figure 3: Cartoons as Platform for Sharing Sensitive Ideas on Covid-19 Source: (Facebook, 2020).

The findings of this study also corroborated the position of ECOWAS in 2020 that the coronavirus could increase the number of people at risk due to lack of food and malnutrition from 17 million to 50 million people between June and August 2020. The report by the ECOWAS in 2020 also coincided with the scene of people who were begging from door-to-door to feed themselves as a result of the nature of the bad economy in the country. Evidence in the cartoon shows the doctors' diagnosis of a positive result for hunger instead of the Covid-19 pandemic as depicted in the cartoon. Thus, scholars like Sani and Abdullah [14] identified cartoons as a potent multimodal genre comprising linguistic and nonlinguistic devices to convey meaningful messages on sensitive issues.

### RO2: Cartoons as an Attack Tool on Covid-19 in Nigeria

Based on the cartoon on Figure 4, it was discovered that cartoons on Covid-19 were used as an attack tool. The first step to gain attention is to use Cartoons. Many cartoons were used to attack politicians in Nigeria. For example, this cartoon was used to attack politicians who shared rice and oil during the campaign period in Nigeria. Based on the intended message, this cartoon must have been produced to depict the scene of politicians who value only the election period. This shows that politicians only valued masses in terms of the election, as against other periods like the Covid-19 pandemic. It implied that during the pandemic, they embezzled the money released for the purchase and distribution of sensitive materials. As shown in the cartoon on Figure 4, people expected that during a hard time like the Covid-19 era, politicians should be able to share materials like hand sanitizers and facemasks. Sani [13] corroborates that cartoons help to set the tone of public discussions on issues of national concern either as a form of attack

tool or to attract attention to a particular problem. This validates the findings of the study that during the Covid-19 pandemic, such cartoons were evident on social media like Facebook.

f4

Another cartoon in this category is the one on Figure 5, which shows the discovery of U.S chloroquine that could treat the coronavirus. The picture shows a lack of substantial efforts in Nigeria to discover drugs that could treat the virus. However, now that the U.S has come out with chloroquine, Nigerians would start using it to generate a huge amount of money as depicted in the cartoon on Figure 5.

The imagery in the cartoon shows that the discovered chloroquine in the U.S would go for an outrageous amount of N 19,000. The cartoonist showcases the weak nature of the country in terms of research to discover drugs that would cure the virus but shows the country's strength in using available opportunities to make money. Based on the theoretical postulations of the visual rhetoric, scholars like Gwandu [8] and Msughter [10,11] observed that the meaning of cartoons is deeper beyond the literal sense, and the visual image holds a significant meaning.

Similarly, another cartoon on Figure 6 was also used to attract attention on social media. The cartoon was used to show how the Governor of Kano State was interested in getting money as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the President of Nigeria was presented in a cartoon to depict the scene. For instance, "are you giving me in Naira or Dollars?" (See Figure 6). The cartoon was created to showcase some level of love for money rather than the materials and the technical assistance needed to contain the virus.

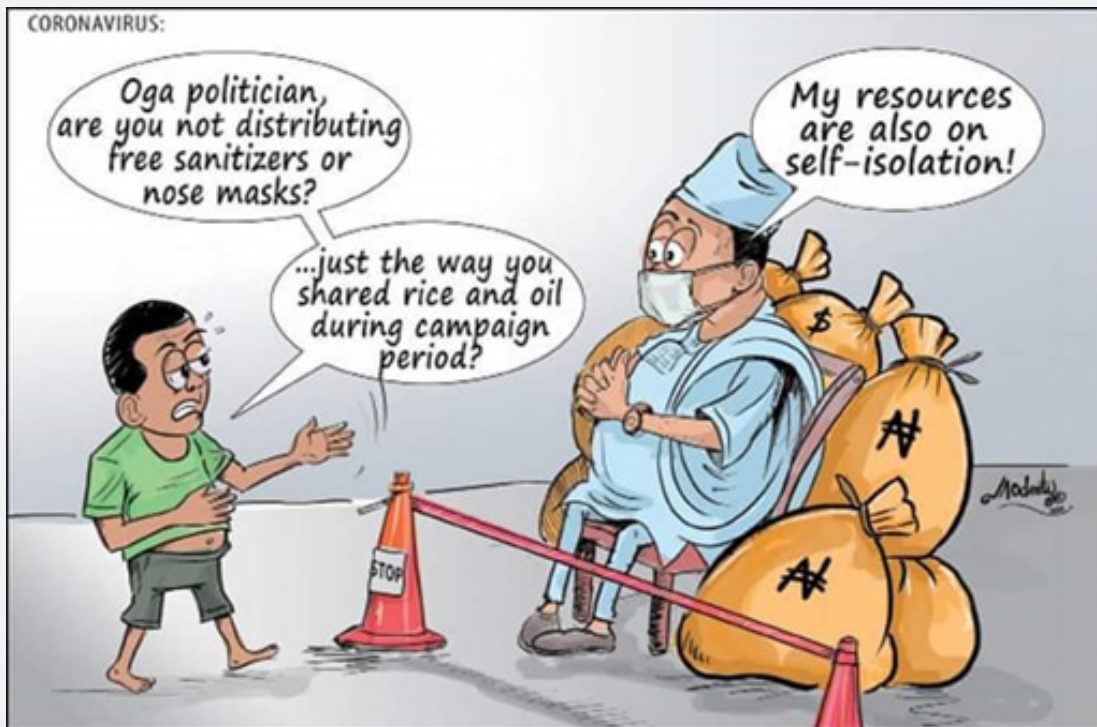


Figure 4: Cartoons as an Attack Tool on Covid-19 Source: (Facebook, 2020).



Figure 5: Cartoons as an Attack Tool on Covid-19 Source: (Facebook, 2020).



**Figure 6:** Cartoons as an Attack Tool on Covid-19 Source: (Facebook, 2020).

To display this, the cartoon was created, which dramatized the event. It was meant to depict the climax that shows love for money, especially when it comes in dollars. The *babanrigo* or *agbada* (big clothe) depicts this scene. Another connotative meaning that could be attached to the cartoon is how most citizens perceive the issue of Covid-19 as an avenue for the Nigerian government to generate money. Within this perspective, Kinyua (19) concludes that there is no doubt that cartoons have more to offer than entertaining readers. Hence, cartoons are meant to instigate a reflection on what is happening in a society [20-22].

### **R03: Pull a Prank on Covid-19 in Nigeria**

Cartoon on Figure 7 was used to pull a prank. For instance, this cartoon shows how the doctor is fighting to curtail the spread of Covid-19. On the other hand, a police person is also captured in action pushing people to stay in-door. This also shows that force was also used on people that were not willing to cooperate with the guideline of stay at home. It is humorous based on the action displayed in the cartoons, but a serious message was passed.

This means that the situation of Covid-19 in Nigeria was and is a serious one, physically, socially, psychologically and economically, and there is a need for doctors, police and people, among others to do the needful to address the current situation of Covid-19 in Nigeria. Such images or cartoons were created to pull a prank. This corroborates the findings by Msughter [10,11] that the use of cartoons during the Covid-19 was significant to share information on how best to address the situation. Such cartoons

were comical but carried meaningful information to people. Thus, it is safe to argue that cartoons are fundamentally important as citizens used them to pull a prank on issues that affect people like the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **R04: Derail a Topic on Covid-19 in Nigeria**

Cartoon on Figure 8 was also created to show how Nigerian politicians do not care about a good project that could help the masses. The cartoon shows that serious projects like the building of hospitals within the Nigerian context are neglected by the concerned authorities.

The intended meaning of the cartoon shows that most politicians do travel abroad for medical checks and treatment. As such, priority is not given to home hospitals because they believe it will serve the need of those that could not afford to travel out for medical care.

Ironically, the Covid-19 has made it possible for the politicians to also attend these hospitals that common people are attending as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This cartoon shows that since everyone is not allowed to travel or visit another country for medical treatment, both politicians and ordinary citizens will attend the same hospital. As captured in the cartoon, the politician could not find it funny being at a local hospital, but he was made to understand that "it is his project so there is nowhere he will be taken to other than this place." This indicates that if the project was well taken care of, he would have also benefited from it.

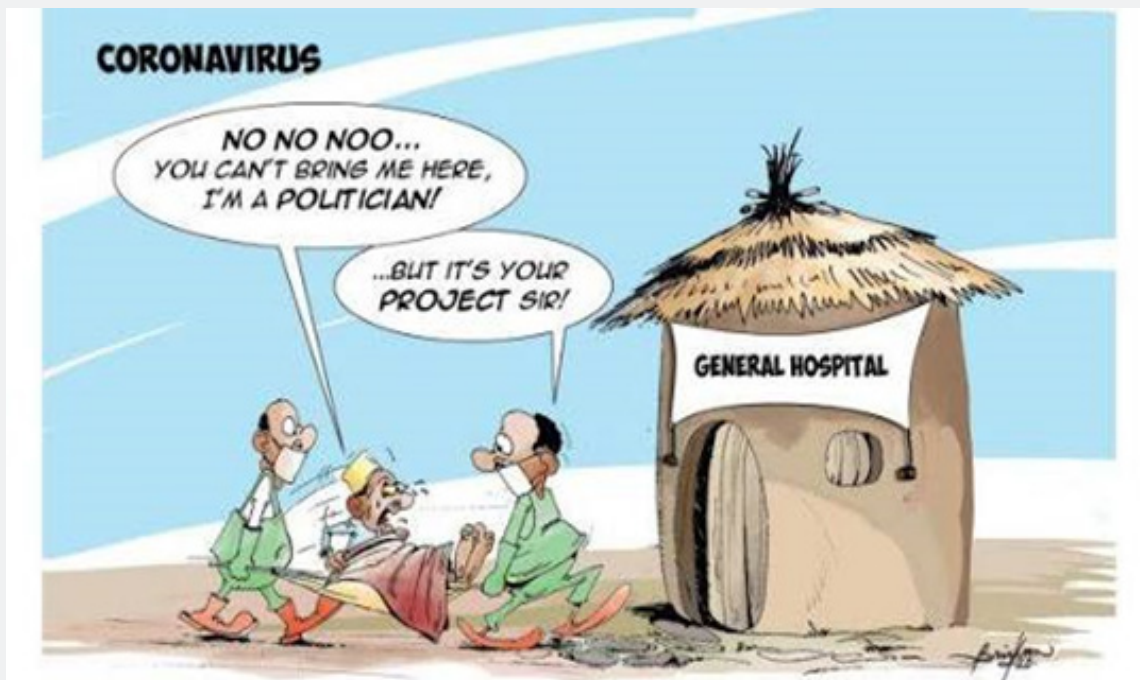


Figure 8: The Use of Cartoons to Derail a Topic on Covid-19 Source: (Facebook, 2020).



Figure 9: The Use of Cartoons to Derail a Topic on Covid-19 Source: (Facebook, 2020).

Another cartoon in this category was the one on Figure 9 that show how Kaduna tightened lockdown on Eid, especially the trucks that were coming from Kano to Kaduna. During the Covid-19, it was discovered that the *Almajiris* (beggarly Islamic pupils) were to be transported to their state of origin.

The cartoon shows that some states could not allow people from other states into their States. This cartoon shows people traveling from Kano to Kaduna were prevented from entering the State. Within this period that Nigeria banned people from travelling; people were stylishly using other means like hiding



in vehicles that carried cows or goats. The animals were on top of the vehicle while human beings could be inside so that they could be allowed to pass. However, in the case of Kano to Kaduna, vehicles with human beings and animals were not allowed as depicted in the cartoon. Bello and Aleshinloye [2] corroborated that cartoonists have contributed to the development of Nigerian media, especially in the case of sharing information on Covid-19 on social media.

### Conclusion

Analytical study of iconographic effect of the visual communication genre on Covid-19 in Nigeria has created an important knowledge vacuum in literature. Drawing from the findings, the study discovered that cartoons are used to uncover social ills and satirize them for public enlightenment. Through cartooning, the Visual Rhetoric Theory, which is an art of effective communication via images typography and texts, can be performed effectively while the media still create humor to amuse the audience. The study discovered that Facebook constituted a major platform that was used to campaign against Covid-19 in Nigeria. The study also revealed that social media contributed to citizen engagement and served as a medium through which they could express their opinion or views like in the case of using cartoons to create awareness of Covid-19 in Nigeria. As a tool for the fight against Covid-19, the findings of the study revealed that cartoons were used to attack, share sensitive information, pull a prank, and derail a topic on the Covid-19 pandemic.

Therefore, based on the study's findings, the study recommends that the significance of cartooning in the society is fundamental. As such, the need for using cartoons to create awareness of Covid-19 should not be ignored, especially in this Covid-19 era. Again, cartoonists engage visual elements at the symbolic or descriptive and analytical levels to stimulate audience interest. This kind of representation will help explore sensitive issues in the era of the pandemic. Similarly, the replication of the study in different parts of the country using other media platforms for the strengthening of the theory, methodology, and general knowledge based on the visual communication genre on Covid-19 is fundamental.

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DOI: [10.19080/JGWH.2022.23.556136](https://doi.org/10.19080/JGWH.2022.23.556136)

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