The Role of Humor in the Construction of Satire in Nigerian Political Cartoons

Sani, I., Abdullah, M.H., Ali, A.M. and Abdullah, F.S

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communications, University Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia

Abstract

The communicative functions of humor and its visual power have made political cartoons an interesting research field across academic disciplines. The first decade of the Millennium has witnessed a considerable research on editorial cartoons. This increasing research demonstrates that editorial cartoons have successfully constituted a genuine genre within media discourse. Cartoons are used to express opinions, construct valuable arguments and provide specific knowledge on contemporary social issues. The goal of the genre is to provide political commentary, address crucial issues and criticize political leaders and their contemptible practices in an artful fashion. In a nutshell, the genre serves as a medium of political reporting articulating a particular message from a particular point of view using language as its prime tool. Given their contents mostly expressed through visual illustrations, political cartoons are best understood through investigation of incorporated visual rhetoric. This paper aims at unfolding the nature and function of humor in Nigerian political cartoons using theoretical perspectives of humor as method of analysis. To this end, content analysis was used to sort out contents of the cartoons. 35 cartoons texts were extracted from the two most prominent Nigerian newspapers namely: *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust.* The findings indicated that cartoonists use humor in Nigerian political cartoons to relive audiences of stressful situations and persuade them towards making opinion on contemporary issues in society. More specifically, Nigerian cartoonists manipulate aggressive and affliative humor styles purposely to construct criticisms pointed to political leaders and comment on current socio-political issues of the moment in order to initiate social and political reforms.

Keywords: political cartoons, visual rhetoric, humor, Millennium, media, discourse, genre

Introduction

Political cartoons are an effective means for cartoonists to express their thoughts and ideas about the issues or events in a particular period in a playful manner (Becker, 1959). Basically the political cartoons genre has gained considerable research in academics considering their potentials of expressing opinion succinctly in such a way that thousand words cannot provide at a moment providing specific knowledge on current events in society (Peñamarin, 1998). Previous research on political cartoons has focused on their nature and functions. For instance, Streicher (1965 as cited in (Benoit, Klyukovski, McHale, & Airne, 2001) explored the communicative function of political cartoons; Morrison (1969) investigated the unique features of political cartoons; Medhurst & DeSousa, (1981) focused on the rhetorical form of political cartoons; Cahn (1984) studied political cartoons as tools for communications; (Bormann et al., 1978) concentrated mainly on content analysis of political cartoons; Thibodeau, (1989) focused on political cartoons and public representation; while Handl, (1990) examined political cartoons in Australian newspapers and identified the central themes which represented the typical Australian citizens and the political parties.

Other studies looked at the visual power of political cartoons in reflecting social and political issues in society. For example, Morris (1993) studied visual rhetorics employed in political cartoons using a structuralist approach; Delporte (1995) examined satirical cartoons ridiculing the Dreyfus affair during the period 1894-1906; Feldman (1995) studied the contents of editorial cartoons and analyzed the symbolic themes on the depictions of six Japanese prime ministers; (Edwards 1997) analyzed political cartoons depictions of the 1988 presidential campaign in terms of image, metaphor and narrative; Benoit et al., (2001) explored the influence of political cartoons on public opinion concerning Clinton-Lewinsky-Starr affair about the impeachment trial proceedings of president Clinton; Seymour-Ure (2001) focused on the future of political cartoons in British and predicted that the cartoons will continue to flourish in future; Nigerian media print; Refaie (2003) examined the use of visual metaphors in political cartoons in Australian newspapers; Conners (2007) investigated on political cartoons and the popular culture in the 2004 presidential campaign in US; Edwards & Ware (2005) focused on how political

cartoons represent public opinions in campaign media; Han (2006) focused on political satire, where he examined the Japanese Cartoon Journalism and its pictorial statements on Korea; Udoaka (2006) investigated on the political cartoon readership in Nigeria; Najjar (2007) explored political cartoons as essential sites for constructing Palestinian Refugee identity; Eko (2007) investigated on how some African newspapers dehumanized and deterritorialized four African leaders; Mazid (2008) explored political and ideological representations in Bush and bin Laden's cartoons depictions; Townsend, McDonald, & Esders (2008) examined how political cartoons illustrated Australia's work choices debate; (El Refaie 2009) conducted a research on Multiliteracies and political cartoons interpretation. In one of his recent studies, El Refaie & Hörschelmann (2010) explored young peoples' responses to political cartoons. Significantly, the review of literature demonstrates that although there has been considerable research done on political cartoons, but little research has focused on the role of humor especially in the Nigerian context, hence the need for this current study.

Basically humor is fundamentally perceived as a communicative activity (Lynch 2002). It has also been described as a universal human and social phenomenon, present in both tribal and industrialized societies (Apte 1985). In reality, humor is an essential feature not only in cartoons, but also in all social life. More specifically, humor is depicted in cartoons at varying degrees, some cartoons elicit smile from the audience without being completely funny, while others are so absurd to the extent that they set people laughing. Similarly, the inherent nature of political cartoons can be understood through its framework that incorporates humor as a vehicle of caricaturing.

Humor in political cartoons is used as an instrument to highlight solely current political situation and social issues in society. Thus, humor is seen a tool capable of exposing social and political absurdities of a moment (Kulkarni 2004). Moreover, it is a weapon used to ridicule humanity specifically political leaders in order to address their follies and irrational behaviors for the betterment of society. Thus, humor constitutes a significant element of the cartoon genre within the realm of wider political discourse. Taking into account its communicative effect, humor as

described by Robinson (1981) is psychologically pleasurable. It is also, what keeps us amused in stressful moment. On the other side, there is nothing that tyrants and rascals fear more than satire and ridicule, and the graphic form of humor has always proved to be uniquely satirical and painful. Humor is commonly regarded as a joke, but in reality it transcends beyond that, for it is an effective device used in political cartoons to display its message in a realistic and attractive way.

Considering its communicative feature, humor is usually shared between interactants and portrays social, psychological, cognitive processes, cultural norms and value judgment. In addition, it is further described as a kind of play that relieves people from intensities of stressed life (Lewis P. 1989). This feature of humor is apparently found in political cartoons which through its graphic depictions ridicule political leaders and their policies deemed by cartoonists as bad or inappropriate. These depictions are aimed at correcting faulty behaviors and enforcing social norms. Also, the satirical attacks provide a sort of relief to people from the stress of oppressions by the tyrants.

Humor as one of the predominant rhetoric of the cartoons genre plays vital role in conveying messages in the cartoons' depictions; it is therefore regarded as one of the essential hallmark of Nigerian cartooning art. Therefore, it is important to note that cartoon humor results not only from the text embodied in it or the interaction of text and image, but also from the pictorial representation even if no text is added in the cartoon panel. For more illustration, a precise summary on humor has been provided:

a)   The picture can be an illustration of the verbal joke, excluding the humorous effect; thereby making the text responsible for the humorous effect;

b)   The picture provides supporting information which is not included in the humorous text; thereby making both text and image contribute to the humorous effect;

c)   The picture is significant for the production of humor; hence humor is solely based on the picture not the text even if there is any (Samson & Huber, 2007).

Significantly, the use of humor in the cartoons demonstrates their function as an essential element of human communication. Moreover, the analysis of the cartoons demonstrates the function of humor as a vital visual rhetoric used in conveying persuasive messages in society. Furthermore, different styles of humor are employed to accomplish certain communicative purposes. Basically, Nigerian political cartoonists employ specific styles of humor to ridicule other people's actions which they consider in appropriate in order to wipe out them in a society. In this regard, styles of humor are categories of humor usage which we utilize in many different ways to accomplish specific communicative tasks. Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, (2003), identified four types of humor styles in their humor styles questionnaire. These are: affliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. In most cases however, Nigerian political cartoons use aggressive humor style to ridicule politicians and prominent individuals. Thus, aggressive humor is the use of humor to enhance the self at the expense of others. This type of adverse humor is helpful to the self only by ridiculing, extreme teasing, demeaning, or mocking others in attempt to make oneself feel better or superior. Aggressive humor relates to the use of sarcasm, teasing, ridicule, derision, ''put-down,'' or disparagement humor (Zillmann & Bryant, 1980). It also includes the use of humor to manipulate others by means of an implied threat of ridicule (Janes & Olson, 2000). In general, it relates to the tendency to express humor without regard for its potential impact on others (e.g., sexist or racist humor), and includes compulsive expressions of humor in which one finds it difficult to resist the impulse to say funny things that are likely to hurt or alienate others. Cartoonists also use affliative humor style while depicting issues. Affliative humor style is used to amuse others and create interpersonal relationships between cartoonists and their targeted audiences in a non-hostile manner. Moreover, cartoonists often utilize this style to make light of stressful situations so as to ease the tension, facilitate relationships, and to reduce interpersonal tensions (Lefcourt, 2001). In essence, this style is mainly utilized to put audiences at ease from the oppressiveness of authoritarian leaders. The analysis also highlights theoretical explanation of humor in Nigerian political cartoons.

Theoretical Perspectives of Humor

In terms of theoretical perspectives, various theories of humor explaining its functions have been identified in literature such as superiority theories, relief theories and incongruity among others. However the depiction of humor in political cartoons is based mostly on incongruity and superiority theories. Thus, humor

assists the audience to understand the meaning and essence of political cartoons in media communication. Basically, three dominant theories are widely recognized in literature and also regarded as conceptual models employed to describe different kinds of humor commonly used in the cartoon genre. These are: relief theories, superiority theories and incongruity theories.

Relief Theory

Relief theory is one of the prominent theories which account for humor in media contents particularly cartoons. These theories deal with psychological function of humor in terms of emotions and feelings evoked by humorous events. Relief theories involve arousal-relief mechanism (Freud, 1905 as cited in (Attardo, 1993)). They are often associated to Freud, a prominent figure in psychoanalytical studies. Thus, humor operates through social interaction thereby alleviating sexual and aggressive tension. For instance, caricaturing in cartoons can stimulate laughter which eventually relieves an individual's tension. This process causes a build-up of nervous energy which is usually released through laughter (Bell, 2002)

Superiority Theories

The main concern of superiority theory is on self assertion that is the disposition of the observer and the observed who initiates humorous effects. This relationship explains how things look funny naturally. These theories focus on sociological aspect of humor in communication which studies humor in terms of behavioral and social level that is why the theories are often referred to as aggression based theories. People usually do laugh at others when they feel superior in one way or the other; that is why cartoonists use laughter from this perspective to satirize and ridicule politicians. More specifically, the major argument of superiority theory is that an individual or group of people may derive enjoyment by ridiculing beliefs of others for the fact that they think their belief is superior to those of others. Superiority theories are said to have originated from Plato's philosophical observation that people get enjoyment from the pitfalls or shortcomings of others (MacHovec, 1988).

Incongruity Theories

This is another prominent type of humor theories found in literature to be the most common link in humor theory (Schmitz, 2002). Humor from the superiority

perspectives is essentially portrayed by bringing together of two disparate ideas, concepts or situations in an unexpected or surprising manner, and this is what most political cartoons employ. Thus they create different awareness and immediate reaction for the audience based on incongruity perspective. That is why when a reader ponders over a particular political cartoon; his response is immediate and this is quite difficult in most cases to explain why it is funny. On the contrary, the weakness of incongruity lies on the fact that it does not generally provide adequate explanation of the phenomenon of humor. Nevertheless, as a theory, appropriate incongruity is quite an essential explanation that accounts on how humor operates in cartoons. Incongruity theory deals primarily with human intellect that can be used to express the absurdity of situations and events and enable audience to discern from the event through hearty laughter (James, 2001; Ruch, 1996). For instance, it is apparent in media cartoons that the cartoonist deliberately designs it to illustrate something allegedly humorous and contrary to the expectations of audience. In other words, the audience members expect seriousness, but the visual projection of the event makes it appear humorous. Thus, displaying contradiction can be seen as atypical feature of cartoons. Evidently, these theoretical perspectives provide an insight into different dimensions of cartoons in terms of meaning creation, comprehension, perception and appreciation specifically in printed media such as magazines and newspapers.

Methodology

This qualitative study has obtained its data from the Nigerian newspapers that specifically publish political cartoons. Cartoon texts in this context were used as units of analysis to investigate the dimension of humor, how it is used in Nigerian political cartoons. The main variables of interest under the study include linguistic and nonlinguistic or visual rhetoric especially humor employed by the cartoonists in their depictions to create and convey humorous messages in the genre, in order to enhance effective communication.

More specifically, content analysis was used to sort the contents of the cartoons texts. For this reason, 25 cartoons texts were extracted from two most prominent Nigerian newspapers namely: *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust*. The cartoons were extracted during the period 2010. One thing remarkable about the period was that it

was seen as a hectic period full of political activities prior to the general elections in 2011. For the purpose of illustration five cartoons were purposively selected and analyzed in the paper.

Analysis

By their power of visual illustrations, the reader at a glimpse can grasp central messages of political cartoons. As (Bergen, 2004) posits, cartoons are form of visual signifiers and the meanings these illustrations create are their signified. Cartoonists capitalize the potentials of the visual power to depict abstract and complex ideas and turn them into concrete visual illustrations that audiences will easily understand and find enjoyable and entertaining. The analysis begins with identifying thematic issues encapsulated in the cartoons. After the thematic identification of issues, a semiotic discussion of the themes follows in terms of the information contained in cartoons' messages. Furthermore, humor rhetoric investigation highlights the styles and function of cartoons in expressing meaningful messages. This qualitative analysis of Nigerian political cartoons reveals in different ways how certain themes are constructed capable of reflecting social practices as well as setting and defining the Nigerian political landscape.

Using semiotic interpretation, the emergent themes of the cartoons comprised electoral reforms and Democratic leadership. Democracy is seen as model of good leadership and a way forward to attaining development. More specifically, most of the prevalent depictions in the cartoons related to this theme focused primarily on leadership and sound democratic principles; the cartoons also express as a matter of urgency the need for having good governance and stable political climate that fosters economic development of the country. Thus the cartoons clearly identified poor governance as Nigeria's biggest challenge at that time. Indeed, the enormity of this serious challenge facing Nigeria has bedeviled the development of ideal democratic governance in Nigeria since independence in 1960.   Fig. 1below illustrates this issue.

Fig. 1

Fig. 1 denotatively refers to president Goodluck, who is depicted ostentatiously in a mood of self reflection. He was standing in front of an enormous dressing mirror smiling too widely in admiration of his mirror image, leaving behind his briefcase. He was specifically amazed with his bulging stomach by holding it with both hands as a sign of affluence. The point of reflection was his sudden rise from the post of a lecturer to an incumbent president. Immediately behind him is a terribly emaciated beggar with cross sign on his head, carrying a big begging bowl. The beggar, wearing worn-out dresses tagged "masses" spreading his hand to beg for sustenance, but the president appears completely oblivious about him. The humorous depiction in the cartoon expresses humor from superiority perspectives to portray the wide gap between the political leaders and the masses.

Fig 2 also demonstrates status of leadership in Nigerian political climate.
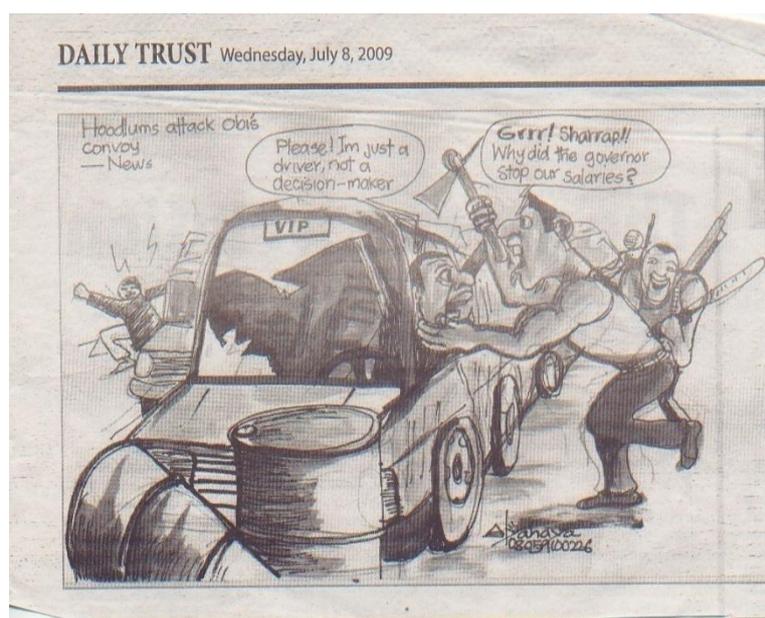
Fig 2

Stressing more on the issue, fig 2 demonstrates the level of insecurity in Nigeria. The cartoon portrays a current scenario in the country's political arena known in the Nigerian context as political thuggery which is considered as one of the security threats currently facing the country's political climate. Politicians employ unemployed youths as guard dogs to provide them personal security and terrorize their political opponents. Also these thugs are used by politicians in committing numerous electoral frauds for the benefits of their masters. As a means of enticing and controlling the thugs, the politicians provide them regular stipends. The thugs become restive whenever there is a delay in their payment of monthly stipends. The situation has gone out of hand where these thugs surprisingly turn their anger to their masters whenever their demands are not granted to their satisfaction.

Going by the denotation of the depiction, a pictorial image of the governor's convoy was portrayed under attack by political hoodlums; they focused mainly on the driver sitting behind the driving wheel; where they jerked him forward in the car thinking that he was the governor. The thugs became resentful following a delay on payment of their allowance. Connotatively, the depiction indicates the alarming rate of insecurity in Nigeria to the extent that governor who is officially recognized as chief security officer of his state is vulnerable to attacks from hoodlums despite tight security measures at his disposal. Using superiority theory of humor, the cartoon reflects the reality of the country's current state of insecurity that emerged as a result of political instability permeating in the Nigerian politics which stems from bad governance. Thus the cartoon calls for urgent political reformations in order to sanitize the politicians and the polity.
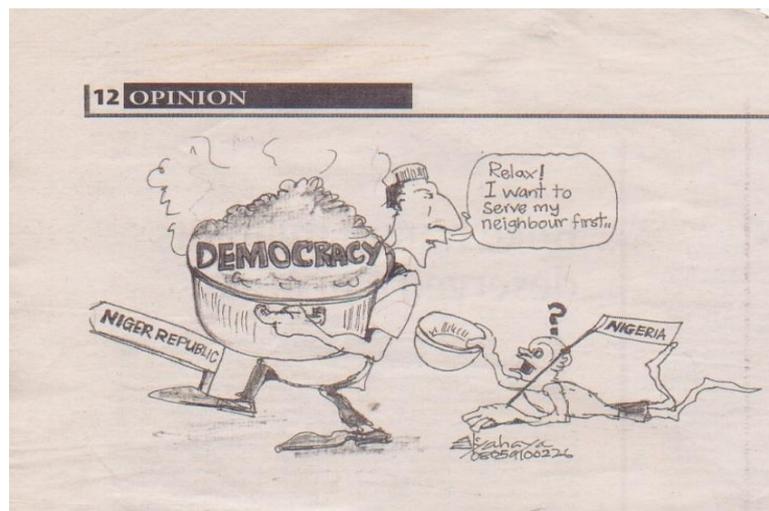
Fig 3

The denotation of this cartoon refers to the late president depicted on transit carrying a huge container full of cooked food labeled "Democracy" heading to Niger republic as indicated by the signboard. On the far side is a pictorial image of a pauper who fell flat on the bare ground, holding an empty begging bowl with one hand and the national flag with the other hand. The pauper was looking keenly at the food. Furthermore, he was implicitly begging for the food by his body gesture, though not sure whether he will get his share or not. The president is aware of the pauper's condition but assured him that he gives more priority to his neighbor.

The connotation of the cartoon signifies that Nigerian leaders give much more preference to foreign aid than their citizens. They become oblivious to the people's basic needs; undeniably, food is one of the most basic necessities of life to human beings. The pauper represents the impoverished condition of the masses in Nigeria. The depiction came at a time when Niger republic experienced acute shortage of food as a result of drought. With this in mind, the cartoonist utilizes incongruity perspectives of humor to criticize government policy for giving supremacy to foreign issues over the domestic issues that are more significant to people and the country at large.

Pertaining to electoral practices, the conduct of free and fair election constitutes major challenges to Nigeria; vote rigging and other means of coercion are freely practiced by all major parties to remain competitive. Perhaps, this might be the

reason why the current president promised to implement viable electoral reforms that will prepare the country to the conduct of free and fair elections that will be recognized and accepted by both local and international community. Fig 4 illustrates this issue

Fig 4

In Fig 4, the cartoon depicts the forces surrounding the electoral body, where a huge ballot box was portrayed at the centre of the cartoon as a symbol of the commission carrying its acronym (INEC). The verbal text projects the commission as the hottest job in Nigeria. At the right hand side was the deputy chairman of the commission who was instructed to run the affairs of the commission before the appointment of its chairman. He was kneeling down and solemnly praying to God to grant him the courage and strength needed to lift the huge ballot box. A bright brief case is visibly displayed behind him. At the other side, an image of a giant monster is depicted grasping firmly the ballot box with one of his hand and holding a giant baton attached with a sticker carrying a phrase "Electoral Fraud"

This cartoon depicts the difficult situation and great challenge of running the affairs of the electoral commission. The commission is seriously debilitated by evil forces, the vicious crop of politicians as perpetrators of the current political volatility who are seriously involved in fraudulent electoral practices and openly use dubious ways of winning elections such as rigging, violence and bribing the commission's officials. They also use different forms of coercions such as illegitimate use of thugs to terrorize their political opponents in order to remain dominant and competitive.

The fervent desire and struggle for power shown by politicians in various ways make the job of manning the commission a herculean task. Moreover, this cartoon reflects the nature of electoral practices and political foul play currently prevailing in Nigeria. Undoubtedly, there is a need not only for electoral reforms, but also political reformations in Nigerian politics. The reforms allegedly begin with revitalizing the electoral body responsible for regulating elections and related practices as a step forward to ensure the conduct of credible elections. Reflecting upon the country's electoral reforms practices, Fig 5 highlights on this issue.

Fig 5

Fig 5 satirizes the then Nigeria's acting President Goodluck Jonathan where he was depicted as a helpless incompetent mechanic in a garage who appeared so puzzled holding unskillfully a big spinner. He was also portrayed staring away from a terribly smashed car bearing bold inscription "Electoral reform". A toolkit was displayed behind him whom he seems to ignore completely. The cartoon denotatively refers to the president's alleged commitment to implement his alleged electoral reforms. However, he was perplexed with the complexity of the reforms to the extent that he did not know exactly where to begin. Moreover, the way he looks at the car and the way he holds the spinner indicate clearly his incompetence and incapability to repair the smashed car.

Connotatively, this cartoon vividly lampoons the acting president by portraying him as someone naïve and unskillful who lacks sense of direction in his leadership. He appears to be a square peg in a round hole; in other words, he is a wrong man in a

wrong direction. The point of satire lies on the fact that he was relegated from the highest rank of a president to the lowest status of an incompetent laborer, who was irresolute and lacks self confidence in his work. These depictions demonstrate how humor is used to depict politicians and political practices in a particular period.

Conclusion

Basically, humor is perceived as a cognitive experience that involves a particular interpretation of socio-cultural reality leading to a "mirthful" condition resulting to laughter as an outward communicative activity (Apte, 1985). Taking into account the Nigerian political cartoons, humor plays vital communicative roles in media discourse especially newspaper cartoons. Considering the depictions, Nigerian political cartoons are largely composed from two prominent theoretical perspectives of humor, namely: incongruity and superiority theories. The incongruity theory posits that people usually laugh at something they find surprising and unexpected involving noticeable deviation of an accepted social norm.

More specifically, the analysis indicates these theoretical perspectives highlighting on how humor is infused in the cartoons texts. For instance in Fig 1, humor evokes from the depiction of incongruous relations between the character's previous position of a teacher and his current prestigious position of a president. Likewise, Fig 5 humorous depiction stems from incongruous relations where a sudden shift of role and status occurred in the cartoon. The president's supreme position of a decision maker was overturned to a naïve mechanic laborer in a state of confusion. The depiction provides a precise summary on Nigerian electoral reforms at that moment. While in Fig 3 the object of humor portrays an odd situation where the cartoon criticizes the then president's faulty policy of giving supremacy to foreign issues over the domestic issues that are more crucial to people and the nation.

On the other perspective, Fig 2 and 4 respectively portray humor from superiority dimension. For instance, the humor evokes as a result of vicious attack on a governor by political thugs and demonstrates how he was savagely ridiculed and humiliated in the depiction. Similarly, in Fig 4 the cartoonist has clearly depicted the then acting chairman of Nigeria's electoral body as incompetent and incapable

of manning the electoral commission. The cartoonist was able to express clearly his message in the cartoon through the use of humor from superiority perspectives. Audiences are expected to get enjoyment through the cartoons witty ridiculing of superior officers and political leaders. The cartoon also demonstrates how Nigerian cartoonists manipulate aggressive humor style to create impressions of politicians in the Nigerian context.

In relation to previous studies for instance, Meyer (2000) has identified salient communicative functions of humor namely: identification, clarification, differentiation and enforcement. This study demonstrates how humor is used in the cartoons and its function to persuade audiences towards making opinion on contemporary issues in society. Cartoonists also use humor to unite audiences on particular point of view in terms of important issues of national interest in order to bring positive change. Moreover, humor enables audiences to easily understand the message expressed in a cartoon. Hence, it enhances clarity of expression. Finally, humor is used to amuse audiences, relive them from stressful situations and ease their tensions from the villainies of authoritarian leaders. Considering these functions humor serves as an influential communicative tool not only in Nigerian political cartoons, but also in the whole cartooning art. Given the communicative functions of humor and its visual power, there is a need for further studies especially on the effects of humor to audiences in political cartoons. Future studies should assess the perceptions of audiences in relation to cartoons humor.

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