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KENYAN ONLINE MEMES AS SOCIAL DISCOURSE

CHEROP EMILY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE BOARD OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE CONFERMENT OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN LITERATURE

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF KABIANGA

UNIVERSITY OF KABIANGA

OCTOBER, 2024

DECLARATION AND APPROVAL

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work. It has not been presented before in this or any other institution for the conferment/award of degree or diploma.

Signature …….. Date…….

CHEROP EMILY

PGC /LIT /007/19.

APPROVAL

This thesis has been submitted with our approval as the university supervisors.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved husband Wesley, my children: Ian, Gift, Bravyl and Kenyans in general.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First, I should thank the Almighty God for divine protection, guidance and provision throughout my entire study period. I also appreciate the University of Kabianga for giving me an opportunity to study and grow academically as one of their own.

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ABSTRACT

The internet memes enhance a faster exchange of ideas, information and even cultures globally through their remixing and sharing. Netizens are able to interact by sharing their feelings and thoughts on particular issues touching on social, political and economic dimensions across the globe by constructing and exchanging memes. Through memes, people can disseminate information, satirize or mock political leaders, express disappointment or disgust with regard to issues in their day to day lives. The study of memes is an emerging field in literary works not only in Kenya but also universally. This study purposed to look into the meme culture in Kenya with the intention of establishing what memes reveal about the contemporary issues affecting Kenyans. The objectives of the study therefore were to examine the dominant aesthetic features of memes in Kenya; to establish stereotypes and clichés expressed through memes in Kenya and finally to analyze the contemporary political, economic and sociocultural issues in Kenya as expressed in memes. Data collection was done through the Facebook and WhatsApp platforms in Kenya. A textual elaboration and analysis of data was done using the tenets of postmodernism and semiotic theories. The study adopted a qualitative research design that sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the kind of data examined in this research. A sample size of 60 memes selected through purposive sampling was examined in the study. Content analysis of the memes was then carried out from the sample to find out what it revealed about contemporary issues in Kenya. The findings of the study indicate that memes, like other forms of literature, are characterized by aesthetic features like satire, irony and metaphors among others. The study also discovered that the memes shared by Kenyans express certain stereotypes and clichés. The study further noted that memes reveal contemporary political, economic and sociocultural phenomena in Kenya. This study makes significant contributions to the field of literature by examining memes shared by Kenyans as a new form of literary text, from a postmodern and semiotic angle. The study also creates awareness about the role of memes as social in commentaries in the society. Future studies should focus their attention on drawing comparisons between the meme as a literary text and the traditional short forms of literature. Scholars should also reconsider examining the internet memes from the psychoanalytic and meta-modern perspectives.

SYMBOLS/ABBREVIATIONS/ACRONYMS

AIDS	:	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome.
Blue Colour	:	Symbolizes presence of water/ water body.
COVID-19	:	The corona virus disease that brought about the global pandemic in 2019. CO –stands for Corona, VI- Stands for Virus, D stands for D-Disease and 19 refers to the year when the disease broke out in China, that was in 2019.
C S	:	Stands for Cabinet Secretary in Kenya.
E U	:	An abbreviation for European Union.
H I V	:	Human Immunodeficiency Virus.
NASA	:	It stands for National Super Alliance Party, a coalition of political parties in Kenya formed during the 2017 elections.
NGOs	:	Non- Governmental Organizations.
PE	:	It stands for Physical Education. A practical lesson done outside a classroom, particularly on an open field.
Red Colour	:	Stands for danger or bloodshed in the Kenyan context.
Sheng'	:	This is a kind of language spoken mostly by the youth. It is believed to be an acronym for Swahili and English. **'Sh'** stands for Swahili, a main national language spoken in Kenya; while **'eng' stands** for English, the official language spoken in Kenya.
US	:	United States.
White Colour	:	Has been used in the study to represent holiness. It is closely associated with religion.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following terms have been defined contextually according to how they are used in the study.

Cliché	**:**	An idea or phrase that has been repeatedly been used that it lacks originality
Discourse	:	verbal or written words/ commentaries about a given subject.
Hustler	**:**	A person who struggles to make ends meet. The word is commonly used in informal contexts in Kenya.
Makarao	**:**	Slang used to refer to police officers in Kenya.
Meme	**:**	A term used to refer to an idea, a joke, a photo or an image accompanied by words, that transmits information on culture virally through the internet.
Mau	**:**	A forest reserve in the Rift Valley region in Kenya.
Netizens	**:**	This is a term used to refer to a group of people who use the internet. They are also popularly known as "the online community''. In the study, it refers to the internet users in Kenya.
'Pepe' the frog	**:**	A picture of a frog that was circulated on the social media during the U.S elections in 2016. It was used to represent white supremacy.
Sheng'	**:**	This is a kind of language spoken mostly by the youth believed to be an acronym of Swahili and English slang. In Kenya, it is a combination of Kiswahili and English in addition to other local languages.

Stereotype : Generalizations, ideas, perceptions or feelings that Kenyans have with regards to the characteristics attributed to a particular class of people, race, profession, ethnic group, religion and even gender.

Televangelism: A practice in which preachers communicate religious messages to an audience through the Television.

Worldview : How Kenyans interpret political, economic and sociocultural issues that Come their way.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This chapter discusses the background of the study and the statement of the problem. The objectives of the study as well as the research questions are also indicated. Furthermore, the section captures the justification of the study, a review of related literature and the theoretical framework used. The scope and delimitation of the study as well as research methodology are equally addressed. The researcher has also explained the operational definition of terms used in the study.

1.2 Background of the Study

A meme is a digital artistic fabrication which utilizes a photo and a brief accompanying text. The invention of the term "meme" can be traced to an evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins who in 1976 reformulated the biological word 'gene' to 'meme' in his endeavour to describe information which is transferred culturally. This term was thus used in a parallel sense to the word 'genes' which means the basic biological hereditary units that are passed on from parents to their offspring (Dawkins, 1976). A meme is, for that reason, regarded as a "unit of cultural transmission", just the way a gene is a unit of genetic inheritance in Dawkin's (1976) model. Etymologically, meme is derived from the Greek noun "Mimema" which denotes "something which is imitated." Just like a gene transmits life, a meme transmits social memories. In echoing this definition of memes, Gleick (2011), observes that information in the world behaves like human genes and ideas undergo the processes of replication, mutation and evolution.

Having become an integral part of the 21st Century day to day communication, memes play notable roles in social media. Various scholars have over the years offered definitions of memes. Esteves and Meikle (2015, p.564) define memes as ‘‘shared, rule-based representations of online interactions that are not only adopted, but also adapted by others.’’ For Shifman (2013, p.373), memes are “content units that generate user-created derivatives in the form of remakes, parodies and imitations.” These definitions consider memes as cultural products in which users adapt the messages they receive and then manipulate them to suit their situations or use them to pass their own messages. As Shifman (2013) puts it, memes are created with awareness of each other and their imitation and circulation via the internet by many users justifies them to be regarded as part of participatory culture. While concurring with her, Jenkins et al. (2013) add that memes are not only texts, but also sociocultural practices of creation and sharing.

There are conventional rules in creating memes however, there is need to first explain what is contained in a meme. A meme is often an enjoyable artistic production on a single page, with a photo and brief accompanying text. Shifman (2013) asserts that memes are a group of digital items that share common characteristics in terms of content, form and/or stance. Memes can be created by any Internet user with the help of some websites as explained by Preez and Lombard (2014) who undertook a study on the role of memes in the construction of Facebook personae. Before undertaking to create a meme one should consider the nature of the audience, know the meme and also bear in mind its relevance. To create a meme, one can choose a template, add texts, create and share. Meme creators initially used phrases from English dialects, puns and punning riddles, slang and jokes (Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Shalevska,

2018). However, currently, memes are created and shared in any language in the world, including the indigenous ones.

The rising popularity of memes can qualify them as literary works, a new subgenre of the media culture. Numerous scholars have studied the literariness of memes because they acknowledge them as part of popular culture (Cherian, 2019). A number of researchers have sought to investigate and classify them under literary studies because contextual meaning can be attained from the study of the internet memes. Hartman et al., (2021), assert that the use of meme texts in a classroom enable learners to visualize the fictional world and enhance their creativity and artistic friendliness. Like other literary texts, Silvestri (2016), believes that memes as new digital literacies encourage socialization by permitting online participants to interrelate with friends even during wars.

The creation and circulation of memes across the globe happens in various ways because their existence has attachments to all spheres of life ranging from socio-economic to political aspects of the society. For instance, there have been memes on sports where fans share them in support of their teams and even mock their opponents. Scholars have attempted to pinpoint the role of memes in historical development of culture. Czachesz (2022) for instance, considers the bible as a network of memes that have evolved over time and in the process of evolution and mutation, interfered with existing cultures. There are thus memes associated with the bible, the church and African religion. These sentiments are echoed by Dawkins (1989) who argues that the notion of religion and ‘God’ is a meme in itself that survives through adoption across various cultures.

In global politics, memes have been used to spread particular political narratives with a view to protect the individuals in power. Pettis (2018) posit that a dominant group of people can suppress other sub-cultures by controlling the use of images and the ideologies associated with them. The author uses the image of a frog popularly known as *pepe* that symbolized a certain presidential candidate in the U.S elections of 2016, to explain how memes can be used by the cultures believed to be superior to prevent others from posing a threat to their position. This study reveals that memes are used to influence how voters select their presidential candidates, an argument that is equally supported by Nee and De Maio (2016).

Currently, internet memes have been incorporated as tools that are advertently used to buttress political campaigns. Such memes play pivotal roles during campaign periods since they help politicians to disseminate information about their manifestos to their supporters as well as spread propaganda about their opponents. According to Rogers (2019), memes may be altered and eventually abused to benefit certain individuals in the society. Apparently, these individuals are usually represented by the political class in Africa. Moreno-Almeida (2021) posits that the internet memes are used by the citizens to intentionally launch attacks on oppressive regimes in Africa, a contribution that mirrors Mukhongo's (2020) argument that points out that the circulation of memes has enabled the netizens to satirize the political class without the fear of repercussions.

People have also shared memes to create awareness on issues affecting them at a personal level, in the society and the world at large. For example following the outbreak of COVID-19, various memes on the disease were circulated humorously to

show how the pandemic became a blessing to a few individuals yet an economic burden to the masses in Malawi (Ngwira, 2022). Similar sentiments are echoed by Uwen (2023) who purports that Nigerian netizens shared humorous memes to counter the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is clear from the foregoing that memes hold an important place in the culture of communities, generally and the Kenyan one specifically. It is also evident that various scholars have expressed their opinions on the literariness of memes, hence making them an area worthy of scholarship in literary studies.

In Kenya, the rise in the use of memes is attributed to widespread access to smartphones which have enabled the users to easily access the Facebook, Twitter and even share information through WhatsApp. The initial memes to be created and shared in the country were about Makmende, an imaginary vigilante who was regarded as a hero. Makmende was a fictional superhero and his popularity rose when his hashtag trended on Twitter for hours subsequently making the meme an international sensation (Ekdale & Tully, 2013). Users from all over the world recreated myths around Makmende while drawing inspiration from their own cultures. Their argument is further supported by Kaigwa (2017) who posits that in creating and sharing myths using the Makmende meme, users employed satire to depict the hero as a fighter, tough and a very masculine character trouncing western superheroes. Through this meme, it is evident that information can flow through from a developing nation to the first world very fast which subverts the dominant narrative of the continuous superiority of the West.

The aftermath of the Makmende meme saw a revolution in the meme culture in Kenya. Currently, Kenyans create and exchange memes on trending issues and current affairs through the social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and even TikTok. Owing to their short form and virality, memes spread very fast across the internet (Wiggins, 2019). In addition, they are instantly consumed across the diverse cultures in the country. A single meme can convey varied information on a number of issues to its audience. Memes are shared on various subjects ranging from education, health, food, politics, leadership, religion, marriage to relationships among others. They are circulated in the form of pictures and words written in Swahili, English, *Sheng* or indigenous languages. Studies on memes in Kenya are mainly based on politics in general with specific references to presidential elections held in 2013 and 2017 respectively. For instance in 2012, Kenyans shared memes on Twitter to encourage patriotism for example through tweets like #proudlykenyan. On the contrary however the then opposition party, popularly known as N.A.S.A., created and circulated political memes for example #Canaan as a means of inciting their supporters to participate in economic resistance through protests during the 2017 elections (Mukhongo, 2020).

This study analysed the dominant aesthetic features of memes in Kenya. In addition, it established stereotypes and clichés expressed through memes in Kenya. Guided by postmodernism and semiotic theories, the study also examined contemporary 21st century political, economic and socio-cultural issues in Kenya as expressed through memes. From the limited number of studies undertaken on memes in Kenya (Mukhongo, 2020; Kaigwa 2017; Ekdale & Tully 2013 among others), there was need to carry out extensive research on this emerging field because studies on meme

culture in Kenya have started gaining prominence thereby inviting a deeper scrutiny by literary scholars. The current study mainly focused on memes shared by Kenyans.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Memes have been generated and disseminated the world over because they convey information on varied aspects of life. The spiraling fame of memes has made it an area of interest thereby attracting the attention of scholars who have studied them from different fronts. Some have studied them as part of media culture while others have looked at their literary aspects. The literariness of memes qualifies them to be part of popular culture. This study conducted an in-depth investigation of the literary nature of memes taking into account various literary aspects.

This study investigated the role of memes shared by Kenyans in revealing the contemporary issues affecting them politically, socially and economically, from the postmodernist and semiotic perspectives. Even though memes have been studied from a Kenyan perspective, most of the studies have been linguistic in nature and not literary, nor have they been from a postmodernist angle. It is the literary angle of scholarly inquiry that this study sought to delve in.

The availability and quick access to electronic gadgets and the internet has made the sharing of memes easy thereby making it a medium of day to day communication in the country. As such, memes are an important phenomenon in Kenya's culture, hence warranting a deeper literary scrutiny to understand their role in defining the Kenyan people. Besides, memes have become part of social media sub-genre whose

formation, composition, sharing and effects on the users demand a deeper investigation.

Presently, a large number of Kenyans are consumers of social media; hence, the viral nature of memes cannot be gainsaid. It is against this backdrop that this study examined the depiction of the Kenyan nation in meme culture. This has significantly provided a deeper understanding of how Kenyans specifically relate amongst themselves.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The main aim of the study was to examine how the internet memes shared by Kenyans gives a depiction of the Kenyan nation politically, economically and socio-culturally, from a literary perspective.

1.5 Specific Objectives of the Study

In seeking to analyse memes from a postmodernist perspective and semiotic viewpoint, this study was guided by the following specific objectives:

i) To examine the dominant aesthetic features of memes in Kenya.

ii) To establish stereotypes and clichés expressed through memes in Kenya.

iii) To analyze contemporary political, economic and sociocultural issues expressed in the memes shared by Kenyans.

1.6 Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

i. Which dominant aesthetic features are evident in memes circulated in Kenya?
ii. Which stereotypes and clichés are expressed in memes shared in Kenya?
iii. Which contemporary political, economic, and socio-cultural issues are expressed in memes shared by Kenyans?

1.7 Justification of the Study

This study was worth undertaking for a number of reasons. To start with, memes are a new phenomenon in Kenya's cultural and creative spheres, thereby calling for a scholarly study. Other studies that have been done on memes in Kenya, according to the literature reviewed, are limited to issues such as elections and COVID-19 hence the need to explore other issues affecting Kenyans.

Secondly, there is a paradigm shift in the study of literature since focus has now moved to other forms of cultural productions that are literary in nature. This explains why memes, a new literary phenomenon, deserves to be studied to create content in their nature and functions. The study mainly focused on memes circulated on Facebook and WhatsApp as they are the main popular platforms accessed by majority of Kenyans who have smartphones.

Lastly, the study examined the memes shared by Kenyans from a postmodern and semiotic angle. A number of studies on memes in Kenya have been largely linguistics as the reviewed literature indicates. This study was specifically done from a literary perspective.

1.8 Significance of the Study

This study is intellectually relevant to literary scholars as it offers an interrogation of memes in Kenya from a postmodernist angle and semiotic perspective. It therefore adds value to the existing research on literature and technology. Moreover, literature is generally characterized by aesthetic beauty and therefore the study gives insights on the classification of memes as a new form of internet literature based on their aesthetic features as obtained from this study. By examining the meme as a text the reader is able to understand oneself and the society at large.

The study brings forth the power of memes in communicating information precisely through a photo and a text. Unlike other forms of literature, memes attracts a wider readership. This invites more scholars because the virality of memes enhances faster communication across the social media space. This study makes the society aware of a meme as a form of social interaction and commentary.

1.9 Scope, Limitation and Delimitations

This study was limited by a number of factors. To begin with, the memes that were analysed were limited to those created, modified and circulated by Kenyans only. Moreover, data was gathered mainly from Facebook and WhatsApp platforms. The selected memes were examined in relation to the specified objectives. The study was therefore restricted to looking into the aesthetic features of memes circulated by Kenyans and finding out how they express particular stereotypes and clichés. In addition, the memes were chosen on the basis of their political, economic and socio-cultural contents. The study was therefore limited to the issues that the selected memes addressed. Memes that did not contain the required features were left out.

Most the memes shared by Kenyans are political in nature. Such memes openly attack the leadership in place, posting their images and therefore addressing and analyzing such memes was a challenge to the researcher. This is unlike in other forms of literary texts which a representative character could be used. In addition, the translation sometimes affects the intended original meaning and taste of the written text.

The memes that were put under investigation were 60 and they revolved around economic, political and socio-cultural ideologies. The memes were selectively identified in relation to the objectives highlighted by the study. Moreover, the memes that were examined were specifically those shared by Kenyans either in English, Kiswahili or a combination of both. The analysis and interpretation of the memes was limited to postmodernism and semiotic theories.

1.10 Literature Review

1.10.1 Meme Studies Globally

This section reviews literature of both published and unpublished works on memes in order to identify the existing knowledge gap to merit the study.

In their study that examined the responses of the Polish people towards the COVID-19 pandemic, Skorka et al., (2022) used a random sample of 200 Corona virus memes and 200 non Corona Virus ones found on the internet. Data collection was done through Google searches, Google trends and an internet questionnaire. The study found out that Corona virus memes gathered more scores than the non-Corona virus ones, revealing that the society turned to humour to cope with the effects of the pandemic. This study is similar to the current one because it deals with the same topic (memes). However, the point of divergence between the two is that the current study utilized purposive as opposed to random sampling to examine memes shared through Facebook and WhatsApp in Kenya. While the former study focused on Corona virus memes, the latter was general.

Another study on COVID -19 pandemic was done by Myrick et al., (2022), to investigate how the Internet memes were absorbed during the outbreak of the disease. Using the Psychoanalytic theory, the study utilized memes with animal and human pictures to examine how the subjects responded to them. In addition, they examined the impact of the memes on stress levels of individuals. The study concluded that those who viewed memes in humorous ways could efficiently stand the stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in America. The current study examined the political, economic and sociocultural issues in Kenya as expressed through memes.

One of the areas that it focused on are the memes associated with COVID-19, a global pandemic that has had serious ramifications in different sectors of the society such as health, agriculture and education among others. The point of divergence between the two studies is that the former used Psychoanalytic theory while the latter study utilized postmodernism and semiotic theories.

In their study, Flecha, et al., (2021), reveal how internet memes can be shared communally as a way of reducing the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The memes investigated were those shared on Facebook, Twitter and Linkedin. Utilizing the Collective Coping theory, the study investigated how the threatening COVID-19 related information could be reduced into tolerable limits through the use of memes to enable the victims easily cope with it. The study examined 351 respondents and the analysis of data was done using electronic survey quantitative methodology. This entailed classifying data into varied stages of collective coping with the intention of establishing how memes were used to lessen the stressful effects of the COVID-19 virus. As a result, the people who interacted with the shared internet memes on the pandemic socially found them less scary due to the humour attached to them. The study revealed that these people were less stressed compared to those who were not exposed to the memes on the disease. The study concluded that the sharing of memes across the internet community is the best way to solve the challenges associated with the COVID-19 disease. The two studies however differ with regard to the theories employed in the analysis of data. While Flecha et al. (2021) make use of the Collective Coping theory; the current study used postmodernism and semiotic theories. Another variation is that while the former study collected data from three

major platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Linked in), the latter one focused on two sites (Facebook and WhatsApp).

Hernandez-Cuevas (2021) embarks on a study to determine the most famous kind of Internet meme by looking at the form, function and popularity. The study examines 150 popular memes using the quantitative and qualitative analysis. In addition, descriptive and comparative statistical methods are used to analyse the form and functions of memes shared in the U.S and the Great Britain. The study provided a basis for the current one to examine the aesthetic features of memes shared by Kenyans in any form. The variation was however, the context, which was in this case Kenyan. Another contrast is that while the previous study utilized descriptive and statistical methods, the current one was purely qualitative.

Gardner et al., (2021) carried out a study on the relationship between depression and internet memes. They purposed at examining how the sharing of humorous content of memes that are connected to depression could suppress the condition on the affected individuals. Utilizing the theory of Psychoanalysis, the research discovered that by availing depression- related memes to patients suffering from depression, their situation was made palatable since they could identify with the shared content in the memes and also be able to jokingly share back about their condition. This enhanced social support, trust and improved their self-image. Their study provided a basis for this study which examined the content of memes shared by Kenyans during the current tough times (economic, social and political) to find out if such memes help them cope or not. The main difference between these two studies however, is on the

theories used. The current study utilized Postmodernism and semiotic theories as opposed to the former which employed psychoanalysis theory.

Wasike (2020) examines the relationship between the reliability of the COVID-19 related meme source and its effect on the individual behaviour patterns in the United States of America. The study utilized source credibility theoretical framework to examine the effects of credibility of the meme source on its ability to persuade the users. In the study, experimental design was used and the subjects were selected at random. The findings reveal that people were more satisfied with the memes from a dependable source and they adjusted their behaviour and accordingly responded to the expected measures to fight the pandemic. The current study contextualized the coping mechanisms that were put in place during the pandemic with the aim of finding out how the Kenyan society used memes to cope with particular social issues affecting them. The point of departure between the two studies is that the one conducted in the Kenyan context utilized Postmodernism and semiotic theories while the U.S based utilized source credibility theoretical framework. Moreover, the latter study adopted a qualitative research as opposed to the experimental design.

To establish the influence of romantic memes on romantic relationships among the upcoming adults, Gala and Ghadiyali (2020) undertook a study in India. The study further purposed to examine the gender variation in romantic memes on beliefs of growing adults. Quantitative method was used to collect the required data with the help of the theory of priming. The researchers used purposive snow ball and random sampling to collect data for the study. The findings from the study indicate that the famous memes on love nurtures the beliefs of the young people. The current study

differed from the reviewed one because the target population was Kenyans in general and not emerging adults in particular. In the current study, postmodernism and semiotic theories as opposed to the theory of priming employed in the former study were used. In addition, the current study was purely qualitative. There were similarities between the two studies in the sense that the former provided a basis for the analysis of the objective on gender differences in romantic memes to establish stereotypes and clichés expressed through memes shared by Kenyans.

Wang (2020) conducted a reading on Wiggin's (2019) study on memes. With the help of structuration theory, the study discussed how internet memes and language can be used to maintain power and the status quo in a given society. He further indicates that internet memes are used to relay specific doctrines from the leaders to the masses. In addition, the study suggests that the internet memes can be restructured in line with the nature of the message to be delivered to the audience. The article concludes that internet meme is a spreadable altered, remixed and imitated media. The current study differs from the reviewed in that it engaged a postmodernist and semiotic approach as opposed to the structuration theory. However, the issue of the meme alteration through remixing and imitation was further examined in relation to how they eventually lead to emergence of stereotypes in the Kenyan context.

Wiggins (2019) undertook a study to examine the genre development of internet meme using the Darwinian Theory. The study looks at how symbols in memes can be remixed with other texts to bring out a specific meaning. His view of internet memes deviates from Dawkin's (1989) perspective. The former compared memes to genes that propagate themselves across human bodies. The scholar argues that just like

genes, memes replicate the same action across human brains. According to the study, the internet memes require human-computer interaction to further their development. The study opines that language is an essential factor for the online audience to comprehend the meaning of a given meme. The study further discovered that internet memes are viral in nature and address meaning contextually. Through ideology, semiotics and intertextuality, he gives a detailed comprehension of internet memes. The study thus lays a foundation on which the current one is built. This current study utilized semiotic and postmodernism perspectives to find out how memes shared by Kenyans bring out contextualized meaning in relation to the contemporary issues in the country. As opposed to the Darwinian theory, semiotic theory enabled the researcher to analyse the meaning of memes as symbols of communication.

Utilizing the same Darwinian theory of evolution used by Wiggins (2019) above, Beskow et al., (2019) examine the evolution of political memes mainly on Twitter. Basing on the meme character recognition, images were classified as memes and non-memes. The study analysed the evolution and detection of internet memes during the mid-term elections in the United States. In the study, random sampling was used to select memes from Twitter and Google image search. The study, confirmed that memes could be used in favour of or contrastingly against a particular election candidate. The current study however used purposive as opposed to random sampling method. Another variation between the two studies is that the current one was not limited to political memes since it also included memes drawn from economic and sociocultural contexts in Kenya. Furthermore, while the former one analysed 30 memes, the current study examined 60.

To investigate the types of irony in meme and their meanings, Lestari (2019) undertook a study on the memes shared by the Indonesians on Instagram. In the study, a sample size of 30 memes was examined using the descriptive research method and the theory of meaning. The findings from the study indicate that memes contain both verbal and situational irony and their understanding is wholly dependent on culture and personal interaction with them. The reviewed study provided a basis for the researcher in the current study to highlight the aesthetic features of memes shared by Kenyans. The main variation between the two studies is that the former utilized the theory of meaning while the latter made use of postmodernism and semiotic theories. Another difference between the two studies is that while the reviewed study was based on the Instagram, the current one was based on Facebook and WhatsApp.

Mushfiq and Shinwari (2017) point out that the youth are psychologically affected by memes they interact with on the social media platforms. Their article examined the memes shared on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Using the gratification and cultivation theories, the study looks into the origin of a meme and how the youth become psychologically affected upon adopting it. The study utilized survey research method with an open ended questionnaire to explore how the adolescent male and female youth in Pakistan responded to memes used for marketing. Stratified sampling was used to probe 200 respondents. The results of the study indicate that upon adopting and internalizing the meme behaviour, the character of the youth changes. The current study similarly examined memes shared on Facebook in Kenya by utilizing the postmodern and semiotic theories to examine the present-day issues affecting Kenyans. The two studies also differ in the sense that while the previous one

used stratified random sampling, the latter used purposive. Moreover, the previous study used the youth as its respondents while the latter had no specific age group.

Existing literature by Laineste and Voolaid (2017) suggest that memes could be used to elicit laughter across borders. Using Darwinian Theory on adaptation, the researchers analysed a corpus of 100 top rated memes collected from websites popular with Estonian users and mainly websites dedicated to humour. According to the study, memes globalize cultural communication. The study further reveals how memes as carriers of internet humour undergo some changes before their eventual adoption as part of culture. The point of convergence between this study and the current one is on the characteristics of memes. The former looked into the properties of memes and virals which are famous among the Estonian Internet users while the current study examined the dominant aesthetic features of memes circulated by Kenyans. The present study analysed 100 memes while the current one, 60.

Studies have been done by various scholars to portray the satirical role of memes in the society. Kulkarni (2017), in her article explains how memes can be used as tools to mock the political class. Her focus was on the internet memes used as part of political campaigns in India. She uses both qualitative and quantitative methods in her study. Moreover, a structured questionnaire was used as tool for understanding the impact of the memes on the Indians. Relying on the agenda-setting theory, the study reveals that the internet memes are used by those in power to sway the citizenry to take a particular voting pattern. The research further indicates that memes have been used to oppress and suppress the citizens in that they are convinced to take a particular political stance against their wish. Though handling a similar theme, the

current study differs from the former in that it is purely qualitative in nature and it employed semiotic and postmodernism theories to analyse data. However, the reviewed study provided a basis for the current which examined how Kenyans made use of memes to react to the prevailing political conditions in the country.

An examination on the gender framing through persuasive memes is done by Nee and De Maio (2016) in an article that examines how the memes were doctored against Hilary Clinton to portray socially constructed gender stereotypes during the U.S. Presidential elections. The article posits that gender constructed stereotypes favour males in leadership positions and they are presented as strong while their female counterparts are portrayed as weak. Qualitative method was used to examine the negative image memes of Clinton shared on Twitter during the presidential campaigns. The researchers collected data through Tweet Archivist, used to search archive and make analysis. 780 altered images and memes were analysed. To answer research questions, memes were categorized on the basis of stereotypes and themes. The findings of the study indicate that the persuasive meme content convinced the U.S citizens to vote against the female presidential candidate, Hilary Clinton. The current study relied on Nee and De Maio's (2016) as a basis for examining gender stereotypes expressed through memes shared by Kenyans. The study adopted a qualitative research design as well as a data collection table similar to the one used in the reviewed study but with slight variations. The major point of divergence is on the methods of data collection with the previous study making use of Tweet Archivist and the current Facebook and WhatsApp. Another main difference is on the memes which were examined. The previous study was interested in memes generated by Americans while the current, Kenyans. In addition, the memes that were examined in the current

study were not limited to elections and politics of voting but also included those drawn from the economic and sociocultural spheres of life in Kenya.

1.10.2 Meme Studies in Africa

A number of studies on memes in the African continent as the reviewed literature shows mainly focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and politics. For a start, Uwen (2023) carried out a semiotic analysis of the Corona virus memetic humour in Nigeria. The study aimed at investigating the implied meanings of selected COVID-19 related Facebook memes shared by the Nigerian netizens during the outbreak of the pandemic. In the study, visual semiotics theory and the encryption theory of humour were utilized to account for the derived meaning of internet memes through the interpretation of the significations in the semiotic resources conveyed in the humour contained in them. A sample size of 19 Facebook related memes was selected for descriptive and qualitative analyses. The findings of the study indicate that the Nigerians created corona virus memetic humour to generate laughter so as to counter the grave consequences brought about by the pandemic. The memes, as the study reveals, were also used to signal the government to give priority to the citizens' welfare. This study varies from the current one in a number of ways. To begin with, the number of memes examined was 60 but the previous one used 19. Secondly, the previous study was conducted in Nigeria while the latter one Kenya. While the former study focused on the Facebook memes, the current one examined the memes shared on WhatsApp in addition to the ones circulated on the Facebook.

From a linguistic perspective, Friday and Fredrick (2022) carried out a study to establish the eminent ideology and the performance of actors in the political memes of Nigeria and South Africa. The study adopted the socio-conceptual (con) Textual

(SCT) approach which utilizes the critical stylistics and pragmatic acts theories. In the study, 13 memes out of 30 downloaded from Facebook and Tweets were randomly selected and analysed using the qualitative approach. The study looked into the ideologies expressed in the Nigerian and South African memes juxtaposing the political situations of both nations. The findings of the study indicate that the shared internet memes reveal the political situation in both countries. The main point of convergence between the two studies is on the theme handled that is, memes. In addition, the reviewed study provided a basis for the current one to examine the political issues relayed through the internet memes shared by Kenyans. However, while the previous study focuses on political memes shared in two countries, these are Nigeria and South Africa, the current one was based on memes circulated within one country, Kenya. Another variation is on the number of memes. While the current study analysed 60 memes, the former examined 13.

Another regional study that purposed to find out how the Internet memes were humorously used to launch political attacks in Malawi following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was done by Ngwira (2022). The main focus of the study was on the internet memes shared by the cyber public in Malawi. This was done by the researcher utilizing the theories of humour (nature and function) and the netnographic studies. The study reveals that, apart from humour, the Internet memes contain intuitive commentaries on the society. The study also points out that memes exposed the pain that the Malawians went through following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition it also disclosed that the politicians took advantage of the disease to enrich themselves. The reviewed study provided a basis for the current study to examine the political perspective of the memes shared by Kenyans as per the

third objective. The main point of divergence between the two studies is on the theories used. While the current one utilized postmodernism and semiotic theories, the former adopted the theories of humour. Another distinction was on the setting of the research. While the previous was done in Malawi, the current one was done in Kenya.

While echoing Ngwira's (2022) sentiments on the place of memes in politics, Ojemola and Aya-Obiremi (2022) took part in a study to find out how the Nigerian youth participated in critical events in the country between 2019 and 2020. In the study, the stimulus-response theory of mass media and the theory of public sphere were used. Using purposive and convenience sampling techniques, the researchers selected a sample size of 12 popular memes mainly obtained from Google. Qualitative discourse content analysis of the memes was done to interpret the message they contained. The findings of the study indicate that the youth actively participated in Nigeria's critical events and that the government keenly examines the message contained in the memes shared. The study is similar to the current one in that both adopted purposive sampling technique. The main point of divergence however, is that while the current study utilized 60 memes, the former one examined 12. Another variation between the two studies is also on the theories used. The former study used the stimulus-response theory of mass media and the theories of public sphere while the latter postmodernism and semiotic theories.

It is worth noting that Ojemola and Aya-Obiremi's (2022) study equally concurs with Moreno-Almeida's (2021) suggestions that pinpoint the key role of memes as snapshots of participation in Morocco. The study analysed memes, comments and the reactions posted specifically on the Moroccan satirical Facebook pages as a form of

political participation. Discourse analysis theory was used to carry out the examination of both the visual and verbal texts to find out the underlying power relations and oppression contained in memes of the country's monarchy. A sample size of 53 political memes was used in the study. The findings of the study indicate that memes are used to ignite silent political debates that seek to disempower oppressive regimes. The current study expounded on the ideas from the former one by examining political messages conveyed by memes shared by Kenyans. The main variation however, is that while the former study was purely based on the internet memes collected on the Moroccan Facebook, the latter one also examined the memes shared by Kenyans on WhatsApp apart from the ones collected on Facebook. Moreover, while the previous study utilized discourse analysis theory, the current one used postmodernism and semiotic theories.

Existing literature indicates that a number of studies in Nigeria are based on humour shared through the internet memes to counter the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to Uwen's (2023) study on the same, Agbase and Agbase (2021) in their article suggest that Nigerians shared various forms of humorous memes as a form of relief following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In their study, a sample of 47 memes was collected mainly from WhatsApp. The study applied incongruity, superiority and relief theories of humour in their analysis of the memes. The findings of their study reveal that Nigerians created and shared memes during the lockdown to comment on issues that arose as well as relieve themselves from stress caused by the pandemic. The study is similar to the current one in that they both examined memes shared on WhatsApp. The reviewed study also provided a ground for the researcher in the current to find out how Kenyans reacted to emerging social issues by exchanging

memes. The main point of divergence was on the number of memes which in this case was 60 for the current one and 47 for the reviewed. Another variation is on the theories used. While the current study utilized postmodernism and semiotic theories, the former one used incongruity, superiority and relief theories of humour.

Ngwira and Lipenga (2018) similarly support the study carried out by Agbese and Agbese (2021) in their argument concerning the cathartic function of humour. The two studies agree that humour is a device used to cope with the challenges that life poses. Their study is based on the social media and other forms of digital circulation with the main focus on memes and short written jokes. However, Ngwira and Lipenga (2018) also focus on aggressive and self-defeating humour expressed in memes and jokes which according to them, creates inferiority complex. The study further reveals that Malawian jokes stereotype Africans as impoverished and foolish a conclusion that shows that Malawians suffer from colonial sense of inferiority complex. According to this study, memes are also used to compare regions and tribes. As a result, some people especially from the Northern part of Malawi are considered as more intelligent than those from the south and the central parts. This study provided a basis for the current one to find out how memes shared by Kenyans expressed ethnic stereotypes. The main point of contrast was on the sites, which in this case was limited to those memes shared by Kenyans on Facebook and WhatsApp whereas the reviewed study was based on memes and jokes on the Malawian social media platforms in general.

The reviewed regional studies on Africa revealed that the main areas captured by the scholars in the examination of memes are based on the political aspects of the

continent as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also evident from the review that most of the studies on memes have been done in Nigeria. This left a gap for the current study to look into the literary aspect of meme in the Kenyan context. The review also provided a basis for the researcher to delve deeper into the issues affecting the African continent from a Kenyan perspective. This included but was not limited to how the memes shared by Kenyans revealed the political, sociocultural and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.10.3 Meme Studies in Kenya

Majority of Kenyan studies on memes have been done from a linguistic perspective to critique certain political viewpoints. For instance, Munuku (2022) undertook a study to examine the memes on the social media in Kenya. She sought to establish the messages transmitted through memes shared by Kenyans on WhatsApp and Face book; to analyze the style and structure used in the construction of memes and to investigate the role of Narcissism in society. The study used content analysis to investigate 51 memes collected from Facebook pages of known famous artists and groups she participates in. The study was guided by Fairclough's Discourse Analysis theory. The outcome of the study revealed that memes are either produced as originals or as parasites of other memes. In addition, memes serve the role of educating, criticizing, entertaining, cautioning and guiding members of the society. With regards to language use, the study shows that memes use both English and Kiswahili. In as much as the two studies share the setting, the current study departed from the former to look into the aesthetic features of memes shared by Kenyans. It also employed the semiotic and postmodernism theories to analyse data.

Wendo (2021) brings to light prevalent corruption and hypocrisy with regards to the management of the resources meant to curb the spread of COVID-19 pandemic in an article. By employing some tenets of semiotics theory to analyse data, the study uses humour to ridicule the government's approach in dealing with the disease, through humour. In the study, 12 Internet memes are selected purposively from 72 memes that address preventive measures on the disease. The memes are coded in view of themes such as the advent of COVID-19 and effects. The findings of the study reveal how the meme creators employed satirical images to expose corruption and ridicule the excessive use of force by the authorities. The study differs from the current one which employed postmodernism in addition to the semiotic theory to explore the symbolic meaning of memes in relation to contemporary political, economic and sociocultural issues in Kenya. The current study similarly used purposive sampling in the analysis of memes. The study enriched this current one in that memes were classified according to the thematic concerns that they addressed.

In her study, Were (2021) posits that memes containing body images of women have been used in political contexts as a means of encouraging gender based violence. From a feminist perspective, she uses memes to castigate the presentation of women as inferior and sexualized beings. The study provided a basis for the current one to examine gender stereotypes as expressed through memes shared by Kenyans. However, as opposed to feminism, this study utilized postmodernism and semiotic theories.

Mukhongo (2020) uses descriptive analysis to examine how an audience can take part in online politics through the use of Twitter. She utilizes the Cute Cat theoretical

framework to argue that popular platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook among others can be used to lead people into a collective action particularly during elections. In the study, the researcher categorizes selected hash tags into specific political themes. The discussion is based on qualitative research design. The results of the study indicate that social media has simplified activism by availing platforms for online debates on political issues. Just like the reviewed study, the current study utilized similar platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. However, the latter used postmodernism and semiotic theories as opposed the Cute Cat theory to examine not only the political but also contemporary sociocultural and economic issues expressed by the memes shared in Kenya.

Following the outbreak of the Corona virus disease (COVID-19), Oduor and Kodak (2020) in their article investigate how the use of humour by the online community in Kenya enabled them to collectively cope with the dangers of the virus. In the study, a sample of 25 memes was selected from the ones which were shared on WhatsApp from individuals between the age ranges of 20-50 years. The memes were obtained from 5 WhatsApp groups. The study utilized Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis which is similar to Critical Discourse Analysis in linguistics to analyse the psychological attributes of the content of the sampled memes. The outcome of the study indicates that the online community in Kenya was able to collectively cope with the dangers of Corona Virus by sharing humorous content through memes. The current study similarly looked into memes shared by Kenyans on WhatsApp in addition to those circulated on Facebook. However, it did not have a limited age bracket since it examined memes shared by Kenyans in general. Apart from the social

role discussed in the previous study, the latter went further to find out the current political and economic issues expressed through the memes shared by Kenyans.

In their study, Nothias and Cheruyot (2018), interrogated how international journalists framed the African voice by using memes. Utilizing the Soft Power theory, the article applied qualitative analysis to examine 100 tweets and re-tweets shared by famous local and international media outlets. The findings of the study reveal that foreign media presents Kenya as a violent country. Through their memes on Twitter, Kenyans challenged the stereotypes portrayed by Western Media coverage. The current study undertook an in-depth analysis of stereotypes and clichés transmitted through memes shared by Kenyans through social media platforms, namely: Facebook and WhatsApp.

A look at the foregoing globally reviewed studies and on the Kenyan situation indicated that a good number of the reviewed works have gaps that this study sought to fill. Whereas issues on politics and the pandemic have been addressed, there is no organized scholarly body of knowledge in the form of a research on the role of memes in depicting Kenyans socio-culturally, politically and economically. It was hence the intention of the study to carry out an intensive investigation on what memes reveal about the contemporary political, economic and sociocultural issues in the Kenyan society.

1.11 Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the postmodernism and semiotic theories.

Postmodernism theory

Postmodern view of language and discourse is attributed to the French Philosopher and literary theorist, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), who introduced the idea of deconstruction. Deconstruction gives a text an oppositional relationship and explores how meaning in a given text can change depending on the context (Derrida, 2001). Postmodernism represents a departure from modernism. The term *postmodern* is traced to a French Philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* (1984). Lyotard believes that a text has no original ownership. He questions originality and truthfulness in a text and concludes that there is no single truth of knowledge attached to a given text since every single text is subject to varied interpretations. Lyotard (1984) is opposed to dominant narratives which define what art should be, but supports the divergence of human experiences and individual creativity. He further asserts that postmodernism is evident in all spheres of life, the media included. Memes spread virally through the social media platforms hence their proper scrutiny is achieved through the lens of postmodernism theory. This theory shifts focus to small narratives which give room for the analysis of a meme as a piece of art. As a result, a meme as popular culture is examined as an internet sub-genre from the postmodernist perspective since there is freedom to consider anything as art, away from the prior rules and expectations. According to Benaim (2018), memes purely depend on the existing cultural standards and norms to convey ideas being circulated.

The theory departs from the normal literary order and embraces disorder by celebrating fragmentation in the literary world. Postmodernism emphasizes distinctiveness in human experiences and a variance of perspectives. It is characterized by paradox and unstable narrators (Nicole, 2009). Due to the instability of meaning, postmodernism subjects a text to multiple interpretations. These features make the theory quite appropriate for the study of memes because their fluidity opens them up to unlimited meaning. Memes are created and shared randomly with no specific creator (author). Since it is argued that there is no specific author in the creation of memes (Cannizzaro, 2016; Rose & Rivers, 2017), the onus of interpreting meaning is bestowed upon the reader. This view is corroborated by Newton (1997) who argues that the intention and meaning of a text is diverted from the writer to the reader. As a result, the reader as opposed to the writer becomes significant in meaning making. Memes are anonymous texts, therefore the author of a meme is unknown and the time of meme creation is not indicated. By utilizing postmodernism theory which is also characterized by fluidity as opined by Schutz (2000), the reader is at liberty to interpret the meaning of a meme in relation to the prevailing conditions in Kenya.

Postmodernism theory is also attributed to playfulness with language resulting in humorous ironic twists in a text. Postmodernists generally present grave issues in a playful, lighthearted way. Sharma and Chaudhary (2011) argue that in postmodern literature, seriousness is replaced by parody. This feature qualifies memes to be examined using the postmodernism theory because their construction involves playfulness and humour. Meme creators make use of humour and satire to bring forth serious matters of concern in the society as seen in the reviewed literature.

Hutcheon (2000) attributes postmodernism to pastiche which entails a combination of varied literary styles and genres borrowed from other texts with a view of creating a unique narrative. It therefore involves copying and pasting of other works in order to bring out an impressive meaning. The idea of imitation also happens in memes since their creation, remix and circulation across the social media platforms heavily rely on imitation. Memes are therefore created and repetitively circulated across the social media platforms.

According to Ilyin (1996), postmodernism is characterized by intertextuality, a feature that is also attributed to memes. Memes creators utilize the marriage between words, images and graphics to form intertexts. Memes are therefore better analysed through the lens of postmodernist theory. The remix and sharing of memes are based on their comprehension and recall by the receiver and the theme or message relayed. In essence, one can only share what they can understand on the cultural context because memes are understood on the basis of language and cultural context. The resulting memes are a hybrid of cultural texts since they are adopted and changed before being recycled across the globe (Cherian, 2019).

Postmodernism has greatly been influenced by technology. The end of the modernism characterized by industrialization gave rise to the birth of postmodernism mainly featured by techno-culture. As a result, postmodern theory relies heavily on technology for communication. In his evaluation of postmodernism, Baudrillard (2012) argues that the media has presented the world as more realistic than real, therefore simulations have taken over our understanding of the reality. His assessment gave rise to hyper-reality which is a major attribute of memes. He further opines that

as a result of technological advancement and rising breakdown in social fabric in the society, the media paints what is more real (hyper real). Memes present the realities in a humorous way and toy around with the attitudes and emotions of the indecipherable world. This augurs well with the fact that postmodernism embraces complex and often contradictory layers of meaning.

Minimalism also characterizes postmodernism theory. According to Sharma and Chaudhary (2011), Postmodernists exercise economy of words to communicate a wide range of information or ideas, thus allowing the readers an opportunity to creatively imagine and shape the story in their own perceptions. Memes were therefore easily analysed using postmodernism regardless of their brevity. In essence, a photo accompanied by a few words can convey a lot of information and create impactful changes in a society. To sum up, the features of postmodernism theory discussed above made it possible for the researcher to utilize it for the purposes of studying memes in Kenya.

Semiotic theory

The theory of semiotics is attributed to a Swiss linguist and Philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). According to Saussure, language is a combination of signs and symbols which communicate certain ideas (Saussure, 1916/66). He introduced the concept of the signifier and the signified in the linguistic interpretation of meaning. The theory entails the use of signs as part of social life to communicate meaning in a given context. He posits that the signifier is the object or something that you can see, touch, smell or taste while the signified is the concept. In addition, he further argues that one must be able to interpret the relationship between the signifier and the

signified to be able to understand the meaning of a text. The semiotic theory enabled the researcher to analyse memes as symbols and signs of communication by examining the meme as the 'signifier' and meaning as the 'signified.'

Technology has enabled human beings to understand and interpret the use of signs in their immediate environment (Genosko, 1994; Baudrillard, 2012). Memes also rely on technology for their circulation on the Internet. The theory of semiotics therefore enabled the researcher to interpret signs and symbols contained in memes and circulated by technological implements.

Pictorial Semioticians like Forceville (1996) and Barthes (1977) focus their attention on the artistic pictures, images and their interpretations. They posit that a text is a sign, subject to a variety of interpretations by the readers. They further suggest that by unconsciously being familiar with pictures, viewers of such pictures are able to comprehend the meaning relayed by these images. Meme as an image, picture or photo can therefore be analysed with the help of the Semiotic theory in that the meme viewer is able to ascertain its meaning in relation to context.

From a cultural and literary perspective, proponents like Umberto (1986) and even Barthes (1977) posit that all features of culture like language, symbols and values among others, can be studied as communication to enable one understand meaning embedded within them. Therefore, a meme as a literary form was examined under the theory of semiotics which allows the researcher to examine a meme as a unit of cultural transmission (Dawkins, 1976). In addition this theory gave room for the researcher to look into the dominant aesthetic features of memes, as aspects of

culture. The discussions above explain the important role played by postmodernism and semiotic theories in the analysis of memes shared by Kenyans.

1.12 Research Methodology

1.12.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative approach with a view of achieving the intended objectives. Qualitative research is a process of true-life inquiry that strives for an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting. It relies on direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents in their daily undertakings. Merriam (2009) states that qualitative research aids in determining how individuals or groups draw conclusions about human experiences.

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008) qualitative research design is an approach which produces particular outcomes without the researcher engaging in statistical procedures. They further explain that the design enables a researcher to examine human behaviour, feelings, emotions and experiences in their immediate environment. The authors also declare that by utilizing this design the researcher is able to reflect on how a particular meaning is defined by culture. Qualitative research design is therefore considered a flexible design. The flexibility of this design enables the researcher to continuously remain focused throughout the study (Neuman, 2014). The attributes explained above made the design appropriate for the study of memes because their creation and circulation on social media platforms are highly dependent on human beings. Furthermore, the design gave room for the researcher to investigate the experiences of Kenyans in relation to contemporary issues in the country and their reactions towards them as expressed through the memes they share on Facebook and WhatsApp. Denzin (1989) corroborates the assertions made by Corbin and Strauss (2008) by postulating that a qualitative research design gives a comprehensive feedback about the feelings and experiences of the subjects under study. This

argument further enhanced the suitability of this design to be used in the study of memes. Bauer and Gaskel (2000) also maintain that qualitative research is ideal for studies analysing texts, images and sound which perfectly suited the kind of data examined in the study of memes.

The qualitative method therefore allowed the researcher to collect a comprehensive data from the memes shared by Kenyans, capturing the dominant aesthetic features of the shared memes in specific WhatsApp groups and Facebook accounts. From sampled memes, common stereotypes and clichés expressed through them were examined. The researcher was also able to look into the contemporary issues addressed by Kenyans through memes.

1.12.2 Sampling Procedure and Sampling Techniques

The study utilized a purposive sampling approach in the selection of the memes shared by Kenyans. Various scholars have explained the meaning and reasons behind a purposeful sample in research. Schatzman and Strauss (1973) recommend that a researcher should select a sample that meets the aims and needs of the study at hand. According to Mugenda (2013), purposive sampling permits a researcher to select a sample that gives the necessary information in relation to the objectives of a given study. Furthermore, Nikolopoulou (2022) postulates that a researcher should opt for a sample that contains the required features best suited to answer the research questions. A sample of memes was selected purposively from Facebook and WhatsApp. These sites were chosen due to their popularity since they are accessed by a large number of Kenyans hence they provided a large sample population for the study. The researcher also requested to be enjoined by administrators of WhatApp groups that have a

national scope. This enabled the researcher to have access the memes shared in the groups' statuses. The WhatsApp memes found on Facebook were directly accessed without the need for the researcher to examine the statuses of the group.

The kind of sampling in qualitative research involves recognizing and pointing out individuals or groups that are well read about or experienced with the subject of interest, (Cresswell & Plano, 2011). Internet sites that host memes about Kenya like Pinterest were also visited by the researcher through Facebook to collect samples for the study. Moreover, creative blogs that have memes with a national scope also provided samples for analysis. The researcher also sampled memes from sites embedded in Facebook talks about Kenya. In addition, the researcher requested to be enjoined in meme clubs-Kenya through Facebook.

Battaglia (2008) asserts that the main aim of purposive sampling is to produce a sample that can be assumed to represent a given population. The sample was taken from the most active users of the internet who participate in the creation, remixing and exchange of memes. Memes that were frequently shared were considered famous. The researcher also selected a sample of memes shared by different participants on Facebook and WhatsApp in Kenya. In sum, the sample was based on the relevance of the memes in relation to the objectives of the study and was thus assumed to be a representative of the entire Kenyan population.

1.12.3 Sample Size

Sample size refers to the number of subjects or observations included in a given study. Neuman (2014) defines a sample as a small collection of cases that contain

characteristics representing a certain population. For this study, a sample size of 60 most circulated memes formed the subject of the study in relation to the objectives. This sample is deemed appropriate by other researchers such as Bernard (2000) who posits that a sample size ranging between 30 and 60 subjects is ideal. The sample size of 60 memes was considered to be appropriate to meet the objectives of the study and answer research questions. The researcher drew comparisons from the reviewed literature in the study of memes across Africa and discovered that most of them used smaller sample sizes ranging from 12 to 50 memes. By virtue of the study being a qualitative research, a sample of 60 was therefore thought to be adequate.

The question of sample sizes for qualitative studies has been addressed by various scholars and there is a consensus that for qualitative studies, samples are by and large considerably reduced compared to samples analyzed in studies that are quantitative. Dworkin (2012) justifies a small sample size by arguing that qualitative research methods usually focus on acquiring an in-depth understanding of an event or occurrence or are interested in meaning—which frequently revolve around explaining the *how* and questioning the *why* of a particular question, practice, state, way of life, act or behaviour.

Owing to the fluidity of the meaning of memes as argued by Dawkins (1989), some of these memes overlapped in that a single meme addressed more than one objective. As such, saturation point occurred before the 30th subject thereby rendering most of the information provided thereafter repetitive. The memes were selected on the basis of popularity determined by the number of likes, forwards/shares and comments.

1.12.4 Data Collection

Researchers acknowledge that as the digital world grows, enormous amounts of data are generated every second making it a challenge to find novel methods of efficiently extracting and sampling (Pina-Garcia et al., 2016). Data collection was done by studying and taking notes of online communication particularly the Facebook and WhatsApp Statuses. The researcher screen shot images relevant to the study as shared on WhatsApp walls. The memes on WhatsApp groups on Facebook were copied and saved for analysis. Moreover, relevant memes shared through the Facebook accounts and Kenyan meme clubs were also copied and saved for analysis. Several memes about Kenya were also collected from Pinterest site. Observation of the meme content was also done subject to the objective of the study. With regard to the collection of secondary data, the study was enriched through the reading of texts in both the e-libraries and the physical ones since this data complimented the primary one thus helped the researcher to make comparisons and contrasts. In this study, the researcher purposively selected a sample of 60 memes for analysis.

1.12.5 Data Analysis and Presentation.

The researcher chose 60 memes from the sample and interpreted the message relayed by the meme characteristics. Since the memes have words, pictures and specific attributes, the researcher examined each meme and noted down the content in relation to the objectives of the study. Berelson (1952) argues that content analysis enables a researcher to quantify the description of content. It also enables one to draw conclusions by identifying special characteristics of messages, Holsti (1968). The researcher was guided by the table given in Appendix I to appropriately interpret and analyse the meme content, features, the theme message it contained, aesthetic features

attributed to it and stereotypes and clichés expressed by a named meme. The table enabled the researcher to capture all the objectives of the study. To be able to identify stereotypes and clichés, the memes were further categorized on the basis of generalizations addressed for instance those based on gender, ethnic, political class among others. Each meme was given a number ranging from 1-60 for easy identification and analysis. The researcher was guided by the tenets of postmodern and semiotic theories to interpret the meaning of memes in relation to the contemporary issues it addressed. Semiotic theory in particular enabled the researcher to interpret words, signs, symbols and other pictorials in meme to bring out the contextualized meaning. Postmodernism also permitted the researcher to examine the meme as a form of art. Furthermore, it allowed the researcher to interpret the meaning of the sampled memes without necessarily depending on the author. Postmodernism similarly gave an opportunity to the researcher to scrutinize the playfulness in memes that gave rise their aesthetic features such as humour and irony. From a postmodern perspective, the researcher was also able to look at a meme as an intertext. This further permitted the researcher to interpret the various forms of pictorials, words, graphics, symbols and signals that made up memes. Data presentation, which involved the researcher grounding arguments in relation to the data obtained, was therefore done within the framework of postmodernism and semiotic theories.

1.13 Conclusion

The chapter has given an introduction and background to the study. The existing gap has been captured in the reviewed literature and the relevant theories employed in the study have been presented in this chapter. In addition, the methodologies used by the researcher to meet the objectives of the study have been discussed.

The successive chapters give elaborate textual description, analysis and relevant argumentations while conforming to the objectives of the study. The findings are presented in four chapters correlating with the objectives of the study while the last chapter gives a summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations. The next chapter discusses the dominant aesthetic features of memes shared by Kenyans on Facebook and WhatsApp platforms.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DOMINANT AESTHETIC FEATURES OF MEMES IN KENYA

2.1 Overview

The chapter discusses the main literary features of memes shared by Kenyans on WhatsApp and other popular sites accessed through Facebook. The features covered in this chapter include the metaphoric nature of memes, their satirical and referential functions in addition to their symbolic roles. It also focuses on how memes are ironically coined. Moreover, the chapter elaborates on their poetic nature including their function as word plays. Finally, it explains the meme as an intertext.

2.2 Introduction

Aesthetic features refer to the elements of style in memes. Literature has undergone evolution and transformation over time from the initially oral form, through the written ones preserved in books and into the current 21st Century forms attributed to digitalization and internet culture. Like other forms of literature, a meme qualifies to be considered as a new sub-class of the social media literature (Cherian, 2019). As such, memes have some of the specific characteristics associated with other forms of literature.

2.3 Meme as a Metaphor of the Kenyan Nation

According to Merriam Webster dictionary, a metaphor is a comparison that is implied in that a phrase or word denoting one kind of a thing is used in place of another to suggest a likeness between them. The use of metaphors in communication or writing

enables the reader/ listener to create mental pictures in his /her mind thereby comprehending the meaning of an utterance or text in relation to another. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) declare that metaphors create a notable effect in the mind of an individual by giving a strong description of a given subject. In addition the authors also argue that metaphoric constructions play key roles in exposing social and political realities in a given set up. According to Otieno et al., (2016), the use of metaphors in politics enables citizens to comprehend difficult political issues affecting them.

To begin with, metaphorical use of memes in Kenya has given the citizens a leeway to clearly draw comparisons on contemporary political, sociocultural and economic affairs in the country. The success of a meme is partially a result of the metaphors it contains since memes are already metaphorical in nature (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016). Therefore, the metaphors which are clearly understood by the consumers of the internet are likely to out-compete the others. In addition, Younes and Altakhaineh (2022) opine that metaphors reflect contemporary issues in a given society.

The internet memes shared by Kenyans portray a leadership in Kenya perceived to be characterized by hypocrisy and self-interest. For instance following the outbreak of COVID-19 Pandemic in China, most countries were affected economically as the global pandemic caused massive deaths leading to the loss of manpower and closure of businesses. Diwambuena et al., (2020) explain that most of the developing countries in Africa lost their income in dollars as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors also argue that the disease created unemployment and increased poverty levels due to the measures imposed by various governments to contain it. Memes

highlight that foreign donors such as the European Union, International Monetary Fund among others gave out financial aid to support the global economies in fighting the disease. In Kenya such aid was provided by the European Union, US aid and other NGOs. The internet memes also disclose that the funds ended up being misappropriated by the leadership such that the victims to whom the funds were disbursed did not benefit. This as the memes portray, escalated the reasons for the negative attitude that Kenyans displayed towards their leadership.

As a result of the negative perception that Kenyans have towards their leaders, they use meme to paint them as egocentric. Meme 2 exposes such behaviour. It reads: *80,000 vulnerable Kenyans who lost income sources due to covid-19 set to receive Ksh. 606 M from E.U*. To elaborate on the text is a picture of someone who can be identified as a feminized image of the immediate former Kenyan president presented as a vulnerable Kenyan. He is dressed in a woman's attire and is presented as a vulnerable old woman in dire need of help. The meme categorizes him among the 80,000 vulnerable Kenyans who lost income sources due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and was due to receive KSH.606 Million from the E.U.

Figure 2.1: Meme 2

The image is a metaphor of Kenyan leaders who are believed to be driven by egocentrism to put their interests first at the expense of the suffering masses who deserved help because most of their livelihoods were affected by the stringent measures laid down by the Kenyan government to curb the spread of the disease. The picture represents a leader disguised as an old woman who attracts sympathy from any observer. Semiotically, the picture signifies Kenyan ruling class perceived to be greedy since they misappropriated the funds meant for the poor Kenyans who were affected by the pandemic. The meme author reveals that the funds did not benefit the right people as intended by the donors. As Mukhongo (2020) argues, the digital platforms in Kenya have paved way for the people to participate in online protests which enable them to hold the government accountable for its misdeeds. The meme shows how Kenyans are dissatisfied with their leaders and therefore use the image of a 'president in disguise' as a form of protest and ridicule against those who are in power. The information relayed in the metaphoric meme in the Kenyan context agrees with the propositions made by Ngwira (2022) that memes disclosed how the politicians in Malawi took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic for their own economic gains

Similarly, Meme 3 presented as*: Uhuru seeing Magufuli cancel a $ 10 Billion loan from China,* is presented as a parody of the immediate former Kenyan president, Uhuru who stares in surprise at the late former president of Tanzania, Pombe Magufuli who cancels a 10 Billion U.S. Dollar loan from China. The meme signifies that the then Tanzanian president, Magufuli, unlike his Kenyan counterpart, was against foreign loans and borrowing. Ironically, the body language of his Kenyan colleague (glaring at Magufuli's action in consternation) shows that he could have

accepted the loan, given a chance. The meme is a metaphor of majority of independent African states. The meme can be interpreted to mean that even though African states claim to be sovereign, they still depend on donor funds. The eye gaze by the Kenyan leader in the meme reveals the country's perceived insatiable appetite for foreign loans. This meme gives an implication that borrowing is a norm in Kenya. As such, the meme further suggests that by virtue of it being a loan, it has to be repaid with interest. According to Yiega (2022), a large amount of government expenditure goes to foreign debt which has become increasingly unsustainable. Meme 3 metaphorically discloses that Kenyans feel that the government should reduce the high appetite for borrowing. Moyo (2009) refers to the loans from the foreign bodies as 'dead aid' because it never benefits the intended persons and neither is it used for the right projects, yet it must be repaid. The meme creator has therefore used the image to expose the fallacious thinking of the political leadership in Kenya and also to criticize vulnerable economic policies in the country.

The above discussion clearly shows how the negative stereotyping of the political leaders in Kenya has prompted Kenyans to share memes metaphorically presenting them as egocentric and uncaring towards the masses. The memes call for the proper management of existing agricultural resources to enhance sustainability in the country. In addition, the metaphorical meaning of meme 3 opines that the Kenyan leadership should curb unnecessary borrowing as it plunges the country into a bottomless pit of foreign debt which may retard development.

Similarly, memes have been used to pinpoint the underlying problems associated with the money "in excess." Existing research indicates that money is always at the centre

of love stories and as such, people who feel that they have relatively more money are swayed towards an attractive member of the opposite sex (Li et al., 2016). The internet memes metaphorically disclose how the power of money can drive some men into engagement with multiple partners of the opposite sex.

Meme 34 is a metaphor of a myriad of challenges that tea farmers expose themselves in their attempts to satisfy their egos. It reads: *A KENYAN FARMER BEFORE AND AFTER BONUS.*

Figure 2.2: Meme 34

To enrich the words, are two different pictures of a farmer both before and after bonus. The farmer presented before the bonus is dirty, lonely in the farm, looks old and unhappy as he weeds the tea plants. His posture is also stooping. This can be interpreted to mean that he is experiencing challenges because of lack of finances. The first picture of the farmer before bonus in the meme justifies the assertions made by Ward et al. (2020) that people who base their self-worth on financial success feel lonelier and disconnected from the others when they are financially low. On the contrary, the same farmer after the bonus is quite different: he is very clean, stands upright, jovial and even attempts a dance with some women late at a night in a club. In the second picture, the man socializes with women and he seems to derive pleasure in touching a near naked bespectacled woman. While the man could be genuinely

attracted to the woman as the meme reveals, there exists no emotional intimacy between them. A deeper scrutiny of the meme reveals the power of money in human relationships. While the man feels that he is naturally in control over as many women as possible, the meme reveals how some of the women have developed survival techniques to outwit their male counterparts. This information is supported by scholars like Yong and Li (2012) who argue that men displayed a higher desire for potential mate when they were exposed to a lot of resources. The meme thus exposes a two way form of exploitation in that; while men sexually exploit women, they are also exploited financially because avenues such as clubs provide conducive environments for such kind of exploitation to rise. The meme is therefore a metaphor of the twists and turns in heterosexual relationships in the Kenyan society.

Figure 2.3: Meme 12

Other memes have been used to uncover the underlying problems affecting all the citizens in Kenya. For instance Meme 12 which reads: *KENYANS GROAN UNDER HIGH COST OF LIVING* reflects an underlying economic difficulty that cuts across the entire country. To supplement the words is a picture of a man who is attempting to carry a heavy plastic basket of items placed on his back. As a result of the weight of the goods, he can neither stand upright nor lift the items. He is alone and no one

comes to his rescue and he therefore remains in a bent posture, unable to lift even his own head. This gives the implication that he is already experiencing backache and a difficulty in walking as a result. His pain represents the economic anguish that Kenyans are currently going through due to the high cost of the Dollar as indicated by the symbol $ above the meme. The absence of people who could assist signifies that everybody is suffering and hence expected to carry their own cross. The message relayed by the author of the meme is supported by Omar (2021) from a business context that due to large public debts, the government raises taxes in an attempt to increase the revenue collection and this in turn escalates the cost of the basic commodities.

The metaphorical use of memes in Kenya has therefore given the meme authors an opportunity to communicate existing issues creatively in such a way that the online audience is easily persuaded to think deeper to be able to comprehend the message relayed by drawing comparisons between the meme and the actual realities in life.

2.4 Memes and the Satirical

Satirize involves criticizing a particular vice in a given society with a view to having those who engage in it stop or change their ways accordingly. According to Eisend (2009) satire gives room for one to attack a particular subject and in turn elicits comical emotions of discontent with the subject. Satire thus offers funny updates and gives an assessment of issues in a given society (Skalicky & Crossley, 2019; Tondoc et al., 2018; Young et al., 2019). The main purpose of satire is to unmask the vices that exist in a society in addition to making known the height of hypocrisy embedded

in the people's daily lives. It is generally used to comment on contemporary events, attitudes and political issues.

In the Kenyan social media platforms memes are used to reveal and ridicule particular disgusting issues affecting the citizens habitually. Moreover, the satire contained in a meme is used to humorously uncover human follies exercised by specific political classes, religious affiliations, communities and other sociocultural groups in the country.

To begin with, Kenyans communicate their dissatisfaction with foreign borrowing by using memes to mock those engaged. Kenya is classified among the third world countries and Udombana (2013) asserts that such countries are portrayed as battling for economic independence. From the perspective of meme authors, Kenya is believed to rely on donor funds. For instance, Meme 3 discussed earlier in the chapter, satirizes untamed appetite for borrowing in Kenya. As indicated previously, the meme reads: *Uhuru seeing Magufuli cancel a $ 10 Billion loan from China*. Uhuru and Magufuli are former Kenyan and Tanzanian presidents respectively. The words are accompanied by the picture of a former Kenyan president who stares in surprise at his Tanzanian counterpart who cancels the loan. The meme author creatively draws a comparative analysis between Kenya and Tanzania in terms of foreign borrowing. The implication made by Magufuli's cancellation of the loan is that Tanzania's borrowing is controlled and restricted. However, the meme author feels that, unlike Tanzania, Kenya's borrowing is not regulated and may advance the dependency narrative at a time when Tanzania, her immediate neighbour, is striving for financial independence. The meme seems to castigate the habitual desire to borrow by the

Kenyan government. It warns against over-borrowing whose consequences are numerous. Scholars like Musyoka (2017) advocates for reasonable borrowing to enhance economic growth. Abotsi (2024) also opines that accumulation of such debts creates economic instability.

In addition Meme 37 is also a critique of the Kenyan leadership. In the picture, we have a Kenyan president asking one of the leaders whether he has paid the heartbeat tax to the government. The meme reads " *mungwana, Alafu hii heartbeat umelipia tax kweli*." The English translation is that the speaker is asking the addressee whether he has already paid tax for his heartbeat.

Figure 2.4: Meme 37

The meme creator utilizes the economy of words to humourously attack the leadership for imposing taxation on anything on sight. The meme gives the perception that Kenyans have about taxation imposed by the government. According to the meme, high taxation has made life unbearable to the common citizens. However, scholars on business management like Nguluu (2017) argue that taxes help the Kenyan government to generate revenue to finance expenditure.

Meme 25 equally exposes how Kenyans have been affected by the rising cost of living which they attribute to the skyrocketing taxes that they are subjected to. The meme shared on WhatsApp statuses reads: *waongeze kila kitu lakini wasiguze siku za mwizi*. The English translation is: Let them increase everything except the days of a thief. The words in the meme are accompanied by a picture of a sad lonely primate. There is a Kenyan Swahili proverb that says: *siku za mwizi ni arobaini* (a thief has only forty days). The meme alludes to the named Swahili proverb. The image of a sad monkey represents a Kenyan citizen who has given up. The meme brings to perspective the theme of disillusionment in Kenya as it portrays a people that have surrendered to their fate which in this case is the high cost of living. The prayer from this image is that the days of a thief should not be increased because if that happens, they are likely to escape. This is a satirical request in that the words imply that those who will embezzle funds collected from the raised taxes should be caught on time. The meme shows the social role of proverbs, that is, to warn members against unbecoming behaviour in a society.

Similarly, Meme 32 depicts a marriage negotiation session. It is used to expose the perception that the online community had towards the government's delay in paying salaries of the newly recruited teachers. The content of the meme reads: *Wacha waende. Ulifanya vizuri kuuliza kijana anafanya kazi gani. JSS hawalipangi hawezi oa msichana wetu.* The English translation is: Let them go. You did well to ask the boy the work he does. JSS (Junior Secondary School) does not pay and therefore he cannot marry our girl. This meme alludes to marriage negotiations where old men are conversing about the payment of the bride price by a young man who intends to marry their daughter. They agree to let go of the bridegroom since he is currently a teacher

in a Junior Secondary School in Kenya which they claim that it does not pay. To them, this cadre of teachers has members of staff that are poor and so they cannot afford to pay the bride price.

Marriage is thus seen as a business venture that should bring in proceeds. However, they do not see that happening with the kind of suitor seeking their daughter's hand. The teachers of Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) were employed following the current transition in education system in Kenya. This meme questions the point of hiring of teachers if they would be exposed to huge debts, ridicule and suffering due to the delay in payment. The message relayed to the government in the meme agrees with the suggestions made by Almuan and Unife (2017) that delay in remunerations demoralize workers and negatively affects productivity. Therefore the meme author suggests that the government should make prompt and adequate payment of salaries for the intern teachers.

Figure 1.5: Meme 32

In another instance of satire, Meme 26 is a mockery of the religious leadership in the country. The meme presents an image of a popular televangelist known as *Pastor*

Ezekiel Odero. The message in the meme reads: *Waah kumbe ata mimi sina nyota*, which translates to: Waah, so I also do not have a star. A star in this case means good luck or fortune. This meme was used to mock a Kenyan televangelist who claimed to have the ability to return 'stolen stars' to their rightful owners should they pay him a visit to his church. During his sermons, he alleged that satan uses his agents to steal stars from those who believe in the Almighty God, an act that makes such people's lives miserable.

The star is usually connected to economic prosperity, successful marriages and employment among others. In many of his sermons, the preacher posits that those who have broken marriages for instance, have had their stars stolen. The televangelist was arrested following a crackdown on churches believed to be indoctrinating and radicalizing their followers, acts that have led to the loss of many lives in Kilifi County, Kenya. One other such church is the Good News International whose senior pastor (Paul Mackenzie) convinced his congregants to fast to death as a ticket to heaven. It was upon Pastor Ezekiel's arrest that Kenyans on the social media shared such satirical memes. It is clear from the message contained in the meme that he has been ironically preaching about a star that he himself did not have. The interpretation of the meme is that had he the star, he would not have been arrested. Moreover, the white attire he wore (he is famous for adorning white robes and shoes) which symbolizes purity contrasts with the current place he found himself in, that is prison.

In equal measure, Meme 29 openly ridicules religious hypocrisy that exists in some of the Kenyan churches today. The content of the meme is as follows: *Last Sunday a lodging receptionist wanted to confess in the church, the whole congregation refused.*

In the meme, everybody is trying to stop the lodging receptionist in question from confessing. This reveals that Kenyans feel that there is a lot of sexual immorality in the church, the reason why the congregation does not welcome this confession for fear of being exposed. If it were not so, as shown in the meme, the congregation would have left the lodging receptionist to freely testify what God has done for her. The meme creator therefore reveals the rot in the church by juxtaposing the church, perceived to be a holy p lace and a lodging a place associated with sexual immorality. The meme presents a contradiction between what the church members purport to partake in as opposed to the undisclosed sins that most of them engage in when no one is watching. The first emoji that comes after the word church shows surprise. This implies that the meme author is surprised that most people go to church just as a norm but still engage in sinful activities. The last smiling emoji could be interpreted to playfully laugh at those who pretend to be religious but fail to do God's will.

Meme 30 also mocks some of the religious leaders in Kenya. The message in the meme is given as follows: *You have never ever noticed pastors on television will pray and everyone faints except the camera man*. The eye gaze from the speaker in the meme suggests that everyone is already aware that those pastors lie to their audience or else why can't the cameraman faint if it is a true manifestation of the power of God? The look of the speaker in the meme seemingly seeks an affirmation from the online audience. This is because even the eyes can clearly communicate the feelings and thoughts of a given people. The averted eye gaze according to Eunson (2012) signifies deceit and thus the meme shows that the actions displayed on the television are believed to be deceptive. The meme comes out as a clear ridicule because the cameraman has to remain standing so as to take videos of the "fainting" members of

the congregation. The message that the audience of the meme gets is that fainting will make them perceive the pastor as a 'miracle worker.' A further interpretation of the meme gives the implication that the miracle will attract more followers thereby bringing in more money in form of offerings and tithes.

Memes have also been used to launch attacks on some Kenyan men who have the habit of recycling clothes. This is revealed in Meme 44 which reads: *Mwanaume akivaa nguo siku moja Alafu anaosha ni umama…Valia nguo Hadi uchafu ipige duru (nduru)* (It is womanly for a man to wear and wash clothes in a day, he should recycle clothes for a very long time to be manly. The words in the meme are uttered by a prominent man, as portrayed the image of the Ugandan President, Museveni. Even though the meme is meant to laugh at those who prefer to recycle clothes on the assumption that they have no time to change the dirty ones, it is worth noting that they generally accept the mockery or rather take it lightly as portrayed by the speaker in the meme.

The creator of Meme 34 exposes how a Kenyan farmer from a tea growing zone toils very hard, only to lose the money worked for overnight. The meme presents two contradicting images of a Kenyan tea farmer both before and after receiving the tea bonus. Bonus refers to the cumulative amount of money paid to the tea growing farmers annually. It is usually given as a lump sum however, there are some male and female predators who purpose to harvest from where they never sowed. They usually travel from different parts of the country upon learning that the farmers have received their tea bonuses to offer their bodies to willing farmers in exchange for money. The online audience sympathizes with the tea farmer before bonus as he is presented as

dirty. He even looks very old and ragged just like a pauper but as soon as he gets the bonus, his outlook totally changes. In the first picture, he is alone in the farm and he also looks emaciated. In the second picture, he finds himself in a club dancing with various women after receiving the bonus. The message communicated in the second picture is that the women are after his money or else they would have been with him while he was toiling in his farm. The meme ridicules the tea farmers who work very hard throughout the year to get their tea bonuses but ironically lose it to prostitutes in towns during their sex escapades. The interpretation of the meme further indicates that the family members of the victims who fall into the traps of these prostitutes end up suffering because of the carelessness of the head of the family.

In conclusion, the anonymous authors of memes discussed have creatively used texts to highlight the issues bedeviling the Kenyan society with the intention of exposing the vices and having them corrected for a better future. This clearly pinpoints the beauty entailed in the moral function of memes in the Kenyan society.

2.5 Allusion: The Referential Function of Memes

Allusion is defined by Mashacek (2008) as all forms of textual interrelation for example myths, genres, themes and period style among others. It involves a writer making reference to an identifiable earlier text, authors, place, event or period of time. Kenyans use memes in reference to the bible, particular historical period and other literary texts to draw comparisons and also enable the online audience to comprehend and contextualize meaning.

It is important to note that just like the U.S elections which are dominated by memes (Nee & De Maio, 2019), Kenyan elections have also been characterized by the sharing of memes across the political divide. For instance, during the 2017 elections in Kenya, netizens circulated memes that made significant reference to the bible. Wabende (2021) opines that during the 2017 elections in the country, Kenyans imagined a dream journey to Canaan. He explains that the leadership of the opposition was able to persuade the electorates to join them by comparing their journey to power to that of the Israelites as they left Egypt for Canaan (the Promised Land). A similar trend was witnessed during the 2022 general elections whereby Kenyans kept sharing memes about Canaan. However, the tune was ironically changed to suit the winning team.

Meme 6 alludes to the biblical Canaan. It reads: *Enyewe, only Joshua and Caleb reached Canaan*. The meme contains pictures of two prominent politicians in Kenya namely: Moses Wetangula (referred to as Joshua in the meme) and Musalia Mudavadi (identified as Caleb). The two are seated together close to a nice building. The meme uses biblical allusion by making reference to Joshua and Caleb who were companions of Moses. The two men eventually made it to Canaan and they were rewarded for their faith (Numbers 13 & 14). The meme implies that owing to their loyalty to the party that won the elections, Wetangula and Musalia were eventually rewarded, just like Joshua and Caleb. As a result, they seem to be enjoying the good tidings associated with Canaan (the new government) as indicated by the relaxed posture adopted in the meme. The connection between the biblical Canaan and the new government is understood by the online audience in the Kenyan context because they have a common background with the meme creator. This information is well

supported by Valotka's (2019) proposition that the connection between the text present and the text in absentia in allusion is properly comprehended if the author and the addressee share a similar background.

Figure 2.6: Meme 6

Biblical allusion is equally used in Meme 20 where the meme author reveals the instability of relationships and the rising breakdown of the social fabric in the society from the postmodernism approach. The meme reads: *UKIWA HEAVEN JUDGEMENT DAY ALAFU WAMAMA WA PLOTI WAITWE KAMA WITNESS WA KESI YAKO* (if you are in heaven on the judgment day then women of the neighbourhood are called upon as witnesses in your case). Below the words is a picture of a man who is seated on a chair. He looks uncomfortable and holds onto some support as if he would escape given a chance. He stares at some object which is not clear in horror with his mouth agape. The meme foreshadows the final judgment when God will deal with sinners.

According to the Bible, God will punish sinners and reward those who led righteous lives. The physical features portrayed by the image such as gaping mouth and open

stare at the women gives the impression that the man is quite surprised that the women that had witnessed his ‘misdeeds’ would probably reveal the truth to the judge. Even his tense sitting posture signifies that whatever he did earlier while living on the earth was unacceptable to the heavenly judge. The words in the meme and the mention of women versus a single man signifies that the man could have engaged in promiscuity either with the women in the neighbourhood or with other outsiders but the women who lived in the plot witnessed what took place. The meaning of the meme in a religious context is that whatever people do either openly or secretly will eventually be revealed during the judgment day. As explained by Xoshimova and Maxmdjonova (2023), that allusion provides insights into the cultural and historical contexts, it can be concluded that the meme reveals what Kenyans believe in.

Allusion has also been used to bring out character and specific themes of a given subject with reference to earlier historical texts. For instance Meme 23 reflects such a role. The meme reads:

The 1st plague so far is floods. 9 more to go before his heart softens.

Figure 2.7: Meme 23

The meme is accompanied by an image of the 5th Kenyan president who has been used to represent Pharaoh in the biblical context. He is adorned in kingly attire and wears golden rings and a crown. The meme is an intertext that co-relates biblical

narratives and the contemporary issues. According to Li (2006), biblical allusion helps the author to reveal the connection between man, nature and God. The meme author intentionally draws a comparison between the Kenyan leader and the Egyptian King during the exodus of the Israelites in the bible. The Egyptian king refused to listen to Moses' plea to release the Israelites for his heart was hardened (Exodus 7). As a result, God sent plagues to the Egyptians like blood (first plague where all the waters in the Egyptian land turned into blood), and frogs (frogs were found everywhere, even inside the palace, Exodus 8), so that pharaoh could soften his heart. In the Kenyan context, the author feels that, just like the Israelites, the Kenyan citizens have been struggling to make ends meet. The economy is dwindling and citizens are struggling to pay high taxes imposed by the President (Pharaoh) through his government. However, it is believed that their outcry, as portrayed in the meme have fallen on deaf ears. The meme further reveals that Kenyans considered the floods that were then experienced in the country as a punishment from God meant to have 'Pharaoh's' heart soften. In the meme, the floods is seen as the first plague and therefore, 9 more plagues were expected to follow if their leader failed to soften his heart.

In summary, the use of allusion in memes has enabled both the meme author and audience to link familiar biblical stories to the current events in Kenya both from a cultural and historical perspective. Through this style, the reader is persuaded to re-imagine and re-connect the previous and current texts with the intention of comprehending the subject expressed by the author.

2.6 Symbolism: Memes and layered Meanings

A symbol is a word, a phrase or even a picture that has an underlying meaning. According to Lakhadive (2019), a symbol can be attributed to a variety of meanings depending on its usage and context. As a result, different symbols contain different meanings as determined by culture because culture dictates how symbols are used in a given community. Identifying symbols therefore calls for an interrogation of a deeper meaning of a given word, phrase or text by a reader or an audience.

In the Kenyan context, people share memes online to reveal crucial issues affecting them because as Ngwira and Lupenga (2018) argue, a problem shared invites a solution. For instance, Meme 8 has a symbolic significance to the digital audience in Kenya. The meme is presented in form of a question posed directed to Kenya: *Why are you not growing like your friend?*

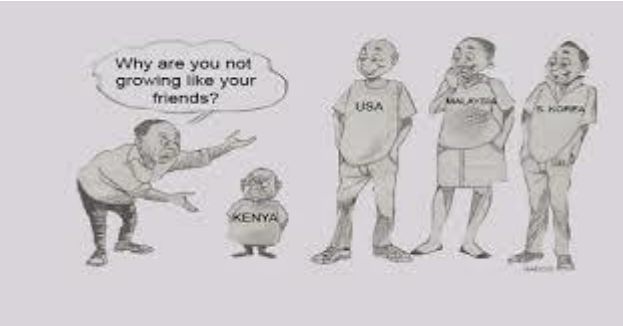

Figure 2.8: Meme 8

The words are accompanied by pictures of four children, Kenya included. The speaker who looks older as revealed by the baldhead addresses Kenya specifically. Among the four children, Kenya, that stands closer to the speaker in the queue, is presented as the smallest. It is also short and appears unhealthy with a big stomach while the others are tall and healthy. The speaker in the meme is concerned about the growth rate of

Kenya and therefore expects an explanation. Unlike other countries represented by the children in the meme like the U.S and South Korea, Kenya is stagnating. By using children to represent these countries, the meme creator expects them to grow and develop gradually. The picture of the malnourished child symbolizes Kenya, a country that is thought of as having stagnated in terms of growth and development. This child as presented in the meme thus needs the support of the others. The meme author believes that Kenya as a country has continued to depend on the West because it cannot stand without their support. In addition, the picture exposes a child perceived to have eaten too much which in the African context symbolizes corruption (Hope, 2014). The meme is therefore a symbol of the many challenges bedeviling the Kenyan nation thus acting as stumbling blocks to its economic progress. Agreeing with the sentiments expressed in the meme, Lidiema (2017) in a study carried out on economics posits that external borrowing affects economic growth of Kenya by raising debt burden which in turn retards development.

Meme 15 echoes Mohan's view of a symbol as an object referring to another. It reads: It reads: *The Kenyan government approaching its citizens for more taxes...*, ..., The pictures in the meme contain a very thin cow that can barely stand and a milk man approaching the same cow while smiling, with many empty cans of milk. The emaciated cow in the meme symbolizes the Kenyan citizen.

The milk taken from the cow stands for the money paid to the government in form of taxes. The milk man represents the Kenyan government who is considered to be prompt in the tax collection mission. In the meme, the author has creatively used pictures to show the hardships which the Kenyan citizens undergo. As portrayed by

the image of a cow in the meme, the Kenyan citizen is seen to be generally overwhelmed by the government's decision to impose more taxes on him/ her. The cow in the meme looks sad. Its eyes are bulging out perhaps because it is sick or underfed such that the thin body can barely carry its own head. Ironically, the milk man comes with so many cans of milk as he smiles and has no sympathy towards the cow owing to the sorry state in which it is. In essence, the meme author exposes a populace that is regarded as wounded. The meme author speculates that the government is taking too much from a people unable to feed themselves. On the contrary, the meme author shares the impression that the same government cannot feed its own overtaxed population. The milk man in the meme signifies a government swift in taking from the citizens but slow in to giving back by providing the basic necessities. From a postmodernist perspective, the symbolic meme empowers the online audience to get varied interpretations of the same objects in order to understand the prevailing reality.

Moreover, Meme 5 symbolizes corruption seen to be deeply rooted in the transport sector in Africa

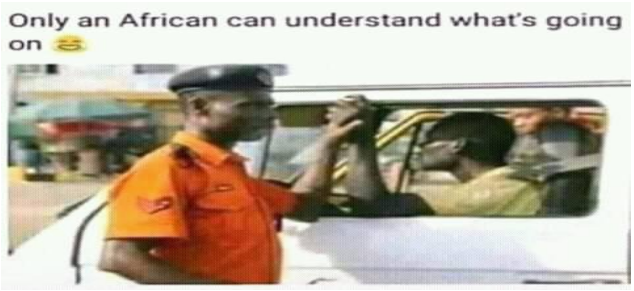

Figure 2.9: Meme 5

The meme: *Only Africa understands what's going on;* portrays a police officer taking something from a driver's hand. This action is a symbol of corruption. The police

officer in the meme is extorting money from the driver but neither checks the condition of the vehicle, nor the number of passengers it has, thereby exposing the passengers to danger. This behaviour, according to the meme is seen as a trait that cuts across many countries in the entire African continent, Kenya included. The meme implies that bribery exercised on the Kenyan roads is considered a menace. A deeper interpretation of the meme reveals that such a habit is a driving force behind the loss of lives due to accidents that would have been avoided if the officers played their roles in enforcing the traffic rules.

While attempting to reveal the challenges facing the male gender in Kenya, the meme creator has equally used symbolism. Meme 33: *I'm at a stage in life where I understand why male chickens wake up just to scream. Sums up the story of a cock-hard-Hard life.* The written text is accompanied by a picture of a crowing cockerel. In the meme, the picture of the cockerel represents the Kenyan man. The message contained in the meme signifies the kind of hard life that the male gender in Kenya goes through in comparison to the female counterpart. The meme suggests that the lives of hens and chicks are bearable as compared to that of cocks. The meme author opines that in the Kenyan context, the male is expected to provide for the family, therefore, he has to go an extra mile to ensure the family is well taken care of. The story of a cock is juxtaposed with the story of a Kenyan man. Contextually, a cock is expected to lead, care for, warn, summon, protect and provide for the entire family. The meme implies that the man as the cock has to wake up early or remain sleepless as he ponders on the strategies to put in place to ensure the family's needs and interests are effectively catered for. Agreeing with the message relayed in the meme, Izugbara (2015) opines that masculinity in men is associated with their ability to act

as breadwinners in the family. The meme author has used symbolism to draw a comparison between the life of a cock and that of a Kenyan man.

Meme 38 humorously presents the images of the former president and his close associates jammed on one motorbike as they go home after their party lost the 2022 elections. The message in the meme reads: *TUTAKUMISS SANA UHURU* which translates to, "We will miss you so much Uhuru". The meme symbolizes the end of a regime in Kenya and the beginning of a new era. The meme creator has chosen to use a motorbike as a means to ferry the former boss and his close allies to signal the audience that they are in a hurry to leave and also give the interpretation that the privileges that were initially enjoyed in the government had been withdrawn. During private or official functions, the head of state would use high-end state vehicles. So by travelling on a motorbike, the meme reveals the change that is witnessed when there is a new regime in power. As Dwivedi (2021) argues, retirement is associated with a change in lifestyle and this is the message relayed by the meme author

On a similar note, the use of green leaves for masks by some of the citizens during the outbreak of COVID-19 in Kenya as seen in Meme 18 symbolizes poverty. The meme contains a picture of a man who has tied some leaves using a piece of string covering his mouth and nostrils so as to protect himself from catching the corona virus. Above the picture, the words *Bora uhai* (life must go on) are written in red colour. The image gives a perception that some of the citizens in Kenya cannot afford to buy masks so as to protect themselves against the deadly virus. By enclosing the written words in red colour, the author symbolizes that the life of this Kenyan in the meme is in danger. The meme concurs with prior studies by Elezaj et al., (2021) that vulnerable groups

exist in Kenya, a factor attributed to unequal resource distribution. The meme also satirizes the government which is believed to have failed to provide free masks to the citizens so as to protect them from the disease despite the financial assistance that has been extended by various countries such as the US.

To sum up Kenyans on social media share symbolic memes to expose deeper concerns affecting them in their daily lives. Symbolism in memes also helps the reader to understand recurring themes of poverty, corruption, power structures in Kenya and gender disparity among others. In addition, this style enables the online audience to actively participate in the interpretation of the internet memes so as to comprehend its deeper meaning in relation to the Kenyan context. This will in turn prompt Kenyans at large to attempt to provide solutions to the prevailing challenges.

2.7 Memes and the Casting of Variance between Expectations and Outcomes

This sub-section deals with how memes shared by Kenyans on Facebook and WhatsApp are ironically coined. This area explains how the circulated memes present a contradiction between what is expected and the eventual outcome in a given situation. According to Airaksinen (2020), irony entails the presentation of situations and use of words that relay the opposite meaning. The author also posits that irony can be intentional or hidden in a given situation. In other words, the author explains that intentional irony is direct but situational irony is used when the unexpected occurs in a certain context.

Some memes shared by Kenyans present situations that are at variance with the expectations. Such memes are shared to intentionally awaken the society to the

realities presently taking place. For instance, Meme 29: *Last Sunday a lodging receptionist wanted to confess in the church, the whole congregation refused,* ironically exposes what happens in the church that is contrary to the expectations of Kenyans.

Figure 2.10: Meme 29

The meme contains pictures of a group of people struggling to bar someone from moving forward. In the Kenyan context, a church is supposed to be a holy place, in fact a dwelling place of God. It is also expected to be a temple where people go to repent their sins. However, the meme presents an irony of situation whereby what happens is not what is expected in such a context. According to Lestari (2019), situational irony indicates a variation between appearance and reality. In the meme, the lodging receptionist is blocked from making a confession contrary to the expectations in a church context. In the situation presented in the meme however, the church service almost comes to a standstill because everybody is making a frantic effort to stop the receptionist from speaking. The case portrayed in the meme contradicts Christian teachings. The message in the meme supports what is proposed by Ravshanovna and Abdulakhatovna (2022) that irony employed in the majority of the fictional work addresses serious issues like hypocrisy in religion and government.

Secondly, Meme 1 presents a contrast between the expectations of Kenyans and the reality on the ground. The meme presents a government that is extracting meat from a horse. Even though there is barely any flesh left on the skeleton of the horse, the government is still looking for bits and pieces that the butcher's knife is able to extract even if they are bones. In the meme, the government comes with a huge basket of taxes on its back and tells the horse to hold on for some bones left. The figure of a bony horse in the meme represents Kenyans who are perceived to have been taxed to the bone marrow. A close reading of the picture further shows that the government is believed to have ironically eaten all the flesh from the horse but still comes for the bones. What remains of the horse, as portrayed by the author, is to fall down and die. The meme author's assumption is that the government will sympathize with its citizens who have paid all the taxes as symbolized by the horse's meat but this, surprisingly, fails to happen as it comes for the bones. The meme can be interpreted to suggest that the citizens are of the view that the government should reconsider cutting down the taxes levied on them.

In equal measure, Kenyans share memes to expose how police officers in the country use excessive force when handling the citizens. This is well revealed by Meme 7 which reads: *BREAKING NEWS In the fight against this pandemic, corona virus has killed 1 Kenyan and the police have killed 3*. The words "Breaking News" are capitalized in red colour. Below the words is a picture of a young man who stares with an open mouth at what the audience perceives to be the breaking news. His facial expression shows that he is quite surprised by the news.

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, Kenyans on Facebook shared memes to expose what they considered to be police brutality. The title of the meme which is capitalized in red colour reveals how dangerous the situation is. Lakhadive (2019) associates the red colour with danger and blood therefore in the meme it can be interpreted to symbolize bloodshed in the country. The meme discloses that while attempting to curb the spread of corona virus**,** Kenyans believe that the police caused more deaths than the disease would have done. The meme reveals Kenyans feeling that the government's effort to prevent their deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic was futile since a majority of them died in the hands of the police. The meme author discloses how Kenyans ironically died in the hands of people expected to offer protection. The meme illustrates the arguments raised by Lestari (2019) that irony discloses the values and personalities of an unknown person. In the Kenyan context, the above irony of situation reveals the perceived hidden side of police officers.

Meme 50 highlights how some Kenyans try to run away from the realities of life. The meme reads: *I was reading how alcohol messes up our liver. So from today, no more reading.* Below the words is a picture of a man who wears a distant stare. He looks unhealthy even though he forces a smile. His pale eyes give the meme reader an implication that something is amiss in his blood. The exposed upper part of his body is naked. The meme explains how some individuals who take alcohol are believed to be ignoring its effects on their livers. The meme author has a feeling that those who partake of alcohol are aware of the consequences thereafter but ironically, they neglect the warning signs. The expectation of the audience is that the speaker should

stop taking alcohol but not the reading. The second part of the utterance in the meme expresses an ironical attitude of the speaker.

Meme 48 also brings to perspective the carefree attitude adopted by alcoholics despite the grave harm that alcohol poses to them. This meme states as follows: *Alcohol is never the answer but it can make you forget the question.* It contains a picture of a lone bald-head man lying on a floater in some lake as signified by the blue colour. The spectacles are placed on his head and on his right hand he holds a glass of a drink that he places on his stomach. His left hand holds more bottles of alcohol floating on water. The picture shows that his sight has been affected by too much consumption of alcohol as implied by the big eyes. The spectacles placed on the head also show that they are no longer helpful to him. In addition, the shape of his mouth reveals that his utterances are incoherent. He wears a blue boxer and he lies on his back. The meme reveals how some Kenyans consume alcohol as a way of escaping the harsh realities in life. A further examination of this meme indicates that the consumption of alcohol is regarded as intentional since it is believed to help the victim temporarily forget a particular problem or situation. The meme insinuates that the taking of alcohol is ironically not a solution to a problem but a temporary reprieve.

Creative use of memes has also given the meme authors an opportunity to humorously uncover existing contradictories in the society. Meme 46 which reads: *Kenyan politicians opening a 10 Million Bridge*, is ironically presented. The meme contains a very thin bridge that is bent. One person who wears a reflector jacket stands at one end of the bridge while another fat fellow stands at the centre and a third one on the other side of the river. A crowd that is believed to be witnessing the opening

ceremony in the picture observes at a distance as the bridge is too weak to accommodate them.

Figure 2.11: Meme 46

The meme exposes what is seen as the inverse relationship between the cost and the actual bridge constructed. The bridge can barely stand the weight of the three people yet it is supposed to serve several people with some using it to facilitate the transportation of goods from one end to another. The sight of the bridge gives a perception that the cost has been inflated to take care of the kickbacks given to certain government officials believed to have influenced the award of the tender to construct the said bridge.

The meme reflects the sentiments made by Chikerema and Nzewi (2020) that most political leaders in Africa use their positions as a means of accumulating wealth. The irony of situation in this meme is that as much as the Kenyan citizens expect a bridge equivalent to the value of the money that is purported to have been used to construct it, it is surprising that the bridge can barely stand the weight of the few individuals present during its commissioning. The meme author shows that the bridge can easily cave in at the weight of a vehicle. The meme exposes what is believed to be poor workmanship thus signaling how corruption has taken centre stage in the operations of the government and the level at which some politicians in Kenya are seen as having

embezzled funds meant for development. We get to know from the meme that those who are vested with the responsibility of taking care of the welfare of the citizens expose them to grave danger. For instance, as presented in the picture, there are engineers, supervisors, architects and other individuals who should play varied roles in such a project to ensure that the bridge constructed is of high quality and meets the international standards yet they are suspected to have slept on their jobs. This could further imply that the online community believes that their hands have been greased by the unscrupulous contractors.

By the same token, Meme 54 also presents an ironic situation. The Swahili meme reads: *Acheni Mungu aitwe Mungu, nani alijua watchman atapima Daktari temperature akiingia kazi*. *aki Corona Wewe!* (God is great! Who would have expected a watchman to check the temperature of a doctor if it were not for Corona?). Below the words is a picture of a child whose hands are openly raised, her mouth is open as if in prayer and her eyes are closed in reverence to God. The posture of the child in the picture reveals the awesomeness of God.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in the country, various containment measures were put up by the government to curb it from spreading. One of the measures included the checking of the body temperature of an individual. High body temperature was an indication that one could possibly be infected with the corona virus and this resulted in isolation of such people. Security officers were therefore assigned the duty of recording the body temperatures of all the people entering institutions. The hospitals were not left out and as such, security officials were mandated with the responsibility of checking and taking down the body temperatures

of everybody entering the facility including the doctors and nurses. This was seen by Kenyans as a change of roles because in normal circumstances, doctors and nurses are the ones who take body temperatures as opposed to security officers whose job descriptions have nothing to do with body temperatures.

To sum up, the online authors are able to critique social norms and customs in the society through their ironic presentation of memes. This is enhanced by the deliberate contradictions, twists and turns highlighted in the meme that prompt the reader to think creatively so as to comprehend the meaning as intended by the author. The digital interaction facilitated by use of irony in memes entertains the online community. In addition, the use of irony gives a leeway for the author of the meme to indirectly question the government of the day.

2.8 The Poetics of Memes

This section explains how the memes circulated by Kenyans are characterized by the creative use of poetic language and forms. Nemerov (2024) defines poetry as that which ignites imaginative awareness by use of language selected and organized for its meaning, rhythm and sound. The poetic form of memes involves the meme creators utilizing sound patterns and repetition in their production process. These are aesthetic features that make memes memorable, rhythmic and interesting, giving memes the ability to communicate in a refreshing, yet forceful way. Whereas images have a poetic ability, the poetics in this section shall be analyzed with regard to the words and statements contained in the memes.

The study shows that some meme authors make use of repetition to achieve a specific poetic effect on their online audience. According to Karoly (2002), repetition occurs when a word is used recurrently either in its exact form or with derived changes to emphasize a particular concept. To start with, a case in point is eme 39: *My fifth is not fifthing the way I expected him to fifth.*

The words in meme are accompanied by a picture of a cat a cat in a standing posture on a chair. The cat looks tired as indicated by its sleepy eyes. It has been used by the meme author to represent Kenyans who were eagerly waiting for the announcement of the presidential results at the national tallying centre. This meme reveals the creative use of sound patterns by the author which in turn makes the meme musical in nature. In this meme, repetition of the different forms of the word *fifth* is meant to emphasize the unexpected delay in the unveiling of the fifth president.

Ribeiro (2007) posits that repetition involves recurrence of specific words and phrases which in turn creates rhythm. In the Kenyan context, the *fifth* in the meme refers to the then incoming fifth president. Since Kenya attained independence in 1963, the country has been ruled by four presidents. However, following the 2022 presidential elections, Kenyans expected a change of guard as the fourth president had finished his second term. As the nation awaited the release of the presidential results, they shared memes which portrayed their impatience on the outcome. The image of the cat that looks tired and desperate represents Kenyans in the mood of desperation and uncertainty as they waited for the outcome of elections. Moreover, alliteration is characterized by repetition of the consonant sound /f/ in the words fifth, fifthing and fifth creates musicality. Other sound patterns are also evident in Meme 39 which is

characterized by the use of assonance. This is brought out in the repetitive use of sound /i/ in the same words fifth, fifthing and fifth. According to Sigar and Saeed (2022), root repetition in a word like 'fifth' in the meme above attracts the attention of the readers to the importance of the key word which in this case is the 5th president.

On the same note, the use of repetition which is a feature of poetry in memes enables the meme creators to put emphasis on the major issues affecting the Kenyan nation as a whole. For instance Meme 7: *BREAKING NEWS!!! In the fight against this pandemic, corona virus has killed 1 Kenyan and the police have killed 3;* puts emphasis the word 'killed'. This is done to bring out the magnitude of deaths believed to have been caused by the police officers while imposing the measures needed to curb the spread of COVID-19. Longknife and Sullivan (2002) agree with the idea raised in the meme by positing that repetition creates echoes in the mind of the reader. Therefore the repetitive echo of the word 'killed' in relation to the number of deaths attributed to the police reveal the magnitude of the perceived police brutality.

Meme 60 poetically summarizes what Kenyans go through in their daily struggles in life. The meme is musically presented as follows*: These days you are either going through a lot, coming from a lot, or about to enter a lot. A lot is going on with a lot of us.* The meme author has magnified the use of repetition to give a feeling that many Kenyans are going through many challenges in the different phases of their lives. Nino and Tamar (2013) support the idea presented in the meme by suggesting that the main centre of attention of repetition is on the logical emphasis of an utterance. Repetition of the word 'a lot' signifies that there are numerous difficulties, struggles or issues that Kenyans are grappling with in the contemporary society. The meme

author opines that life is an unending process full of challenges and therefore Kenyans should come up with several strategies to help them cope. The rhythm created by the meme makes it memorable and catchy to the online audience. The message relayed in the meme concurs with the opinion raised by Johnstone (1994) that repetition operates in a playful and emotional way to confirm or emphasize a given subject. Through the use of repetition, the meme author is able to put emphasis on certain recurring themes such as endurance.

To sum up, the use of poetic features in memes makes them musical, memorable and attractive to the online readers. As such, the authors of memes keep the online community engaged and alert by presenting their content poetically. The meme creator as an online poet therefore participates in edutainment that is creatively entertains the audience while at the same time communicating a crucial message.

2.9 Pun Intended: Memes as Word Play

This subsection addresses how memes reveal the dynamic nature of language used in Kenya. Memes have been used creatively as language games without the necessity of the writers observing the existing rules of grammar. However, the message in the meme is effectively relayed to the reader. Kenyans online utilize word play to humorously highlight specific issues which affect them individually, their immediate community and the nation as a whole. According to Leppihalme (1997) word play may interfere with different characteristics of language such as pronunciation, spelling, syntax and morphology among other linguistic features. As such, word play can be demonstrated through the ambiguous use of language and the failure of a given text to adhere to the rules of grammar.

A close analysis of the memes circulated in Kenya shows that code switching has been employed in their structure. According to Alshani (2020) code switching happens in multilingual communities when a speaker uses his/her language and shifts to another so as to fulfill specific social roles. It therefore entails the use of more than one language in the same speech. Meme creators in the Kenyan context, make use of code switching to relay specific information to the online community. This happens when the writer / speaker alternates between English language and sheng or /and Kiswahili or even the native languages within a single conversation. While exchanging memes online, Kenyans utilize code switching to contextualize the themes contained in them.

To begin with, Meme 10: *NOBODY is going back to BONDO or SUGOI, Wanarudi KAREN!. Utarudi kupambana na rent ukitembea on foot kama siafu*, supports the proposition made by Nazri and Kasim (2023) that code-switching is used to call for unity and togetherness in a given context. The English version of the meme is: Nobody is going back to Bondo or Sugoi, they are going back to Karen but the masses will go back to struggle with the payment of rent and keep walking on foot like ants. The meme contains the pictures of Kenyan political leaders belonging to different political parties seen to be coexisting peacefully away from their villages. In the meme there is a shift from English to Kiswahili language respectively. The meme artist foregrounds the rural homes of the aspirants and their urban luxurious homes most of which are located in the leafy suburbs of Karen.

Inter-sentential code switching enables the meme creator to reach out to different Kenyans and pinpoint that there is life after the elections and therefore Kenyans

should learn to coexist peacefully. The information relayed in the meme echoes the sentiments proposed by Holmes (2013) that code switching is used to establish a bond of unity with the addressee. In the meme, the addressee referred to is the common civilian. The meme, further interpreted, is believed to confirm to the electorates that whether the political leaders on the either side of the divide win or lose, they will still live together peacefully in Karen, a common residential place where most of the Kenyan politicians reside. The message that the author of the meme is putting across can be interpreted to opine that even if these politicians are not elected to office, they already have resources that will maintain them in their posh places and they will not move to their rural homes as anticipated by the Kenyan citizens. On the contrary, as posited in the meme, their supporters most of whom are unemployed will still have to battle with high cost of living and payment of rent. The use of code switching in the meme therefore reveals how Kenyans see their leaders in in relation to in relation to their self- perception.

In addition, foregrounding of some words in Meme 10 above like NOBODY, SUGOI, BONDO and KAREN to stress the message of unity to the masses. NOBODY signifies the political class represented in the picture. In the message, the author makes the assumption that none of the political leaders is going back home after the elections. SUGOI alludes to the ancestral home of one of the 2022 presidential aspirants that is William Samoei Ruto. BONDO alludes to the rural home of the then Azimio La Umoja presidential candidate, Raila Odinga and KAREN refers a residential place commonly associated with the politicians in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. The use of capitalization in the meme to mark these towns is meant to help the meme reader understand the message conveyed. Capitalization is also used to

bring the impression that there are no permanent friends or enemies among the political class even though they come from different ethnic origins. According to the meme, it is presumed that they will live in peace and harmony in their residential estates after the elections as ordinary citizens who might have been incited against each other continue suffering in their rural homes where opportunities are limited.

Moreover, in Meme 10, the rules of grammar are put to rest even though the message is relayed to the audience courtesy of postmodernism. This is because in this meme the author has mixed up capital and small letters in the same sentence. The exclamation mark that is placed after the word Karen is meant to ignite the feelings on the audience so that they can remember to reconsider the consequences of any negative actions they would have wanted to engage in. Kenya has had a history of post-election violence in 1997, 2002 and 2007. Therefore there is always the fear of violence erupting during such periods. As such, the author uses capitalization to warn Kenyans to be more careful during elections. The unusual use of capitalization in the meme is meant to attract the reader's attention and create some visual imagery hence making the text memorable.

According to Nazri and Kassim (2023), code switching plays a poetic and entertaining role especially when used as puns. Meme 49, presented as a pun illustrates this argument. The Meme reads: *Ety watu warefu wanapenda food. ju 'the higher you go the kula it becomes'*. (That tall people love food, because the higher you go the more the eating). Augarde (2003) defines a pun as the use of two different words with similar sounds for different meanings. In the meme the word *kula* which means 'eat' in Kiswahili has been used in place of the word 'cooler'. The two words *cooler* and

kula sound the same but have different meanings. By using the word *kula* in place of cooler, the meme maker changes the original meaning of the text. Tall people are believed to represent those people who have connections or in those who are in power. The meme therefore gives the opinion that the higher the office, the more corrupt a person becomes. 'Eating' is a term used in Kenya as a form of euphemism for corruption. By utilizing the pun therefore, the meme creator is able to humourously highlight corruption that is believed to be widespread in government offices. The message relayed in the meme echoes the ideas raised by Pollark (2011) that the humour of puns is embedded in language play and its meaning needs a double processing of the words involved.

To sum up, Kenyans on the social media use language playfully to signify a number of things and therefore bring out a particular meaning determined by the cultural context. Agetue (2022) posits that being familiar with words in a language cultivates understanding between people. As such, the online community's familiarity with the Kenyan context gives them an opportunity to use language as a form of game to fulfill their needs collectively. The meme as a language game governed by its own rules like the code switching, use of sheng among others enables Kenyans, the key players, to openly express their feelings and ideas without fear.

While supporting the ideas relayed in the meme, Fatiou (2017) further argues that code switching enables the authors to express feelings of self-identity and show identity with others. Code switching in memes has been used to emphasize main the arguments propagated by the authors and expose feelings that they think should be taken seriously by the reader. In addition, the use of familiar signs, gestures and

symbols which Kenyans can identify with in the meme game enables the online community to understand the message enclosed in the meme and thus get a vivid mental picture that leads to multiple interpretations of meaning. Since Kenyans are connected by the common rules of the game, the sharing of humorous memes in form of language play enhances co-operation, thereby bringing the online community together. It therefore encourages sociocultural hybridity. These sentiments are supported by Lems (2011) who declares that puns unite people through shared frames of reference.

2.10 Meme as an Intertext

This section deals with how a meme is composed of different forms of texts, a feature that makes it easy for the audience to infer meaning in a given context. Allen (2022) defines intertextuality as a combination of different texts and varied genres. Similarly, Shifman (2014, p.342) posits that internet memes are made up of large groups of texts and images. The memes shared by the online community in Kenya are a marriage of different texts. They are a combination of different textual forms which include words, images, numbers, graphics, pictures, and other literary genres like proverbs aimed at highlighting specific themes and ideologies.

According to Zengin (2016), no text exists on it's on without relying on other pre-existing ones. The online memes similarly contain both textual and pictorial forms. This is well elaborated by Meme 4. It contains pictures of two young boys who are likely to be aged between 2-4 years. The text is in form of a conversation. The one seated adopts the pose of a boss with one leg crossing over his knee. He asks, "*So you are saying a one bedroom in Kakamega is 4k*". Though the utterance is in question

form, a question mark has not been used. The other one standing and looking at the one seated straight and bent closer to his face responds as follows:“ *But ikiwa karibu na poshomill ni 15k* (if its closer to poshomill, it is 15 thousand shillings). Different colours have been used in the meme that is; yellow and blue colours to stand for the question asked and answers given respectively. The question is in English language while the response is in Swahili save for the first word “but” and “poshomill”.

In the same meme discussed above, the body language of the boy who has a potbelly and takes a posture of a boss could be interpreted as someone who has money and power. He is in a relaxed mood with both hands resting on the armrests and one leg drawn up to rest on the knee of the other leg. The one standing has bent such that his face is closer to the one seated. In the meme, the author has creatively communicated using symbols and numbers. ‘K’ in the Kenyan context stands for a thousand shillings. ‘K’ traces its origin to Greek. It stands for the Greek word kilo which means one thousand as used in the metric and decimal systems. It appears in Kenyan context as slang but it is not easy to pinpoint the exact time it emerged in the country’s communication system, though its use is recent. To sum up, the author of Meme 4 has made use of semiotic signs drawn from not only the verbal and written text but also the non-verbal signs like posture, the use of space, facial expressions and colour to communicate to the online audience. As posited by Zoonen (2017), anything can qualify as a text as long as it is subjected to interpretation, therefore the meme as a text can relay a lot of information through the pictorials are supported by written words. Another meme characterized by intertextuality is Meme 9. It is made up of both words and pictorials. Pease and Pease (2008) declare that there is more that is hidden behind body language. Proper examination of body language may therefore

enable a reader to gain more insight about the mood, feelings and reactions of people where the written texts are not elaborate enough. The words in the meme (9): *Kenya sihami harambee* which translates to "I am not leaving Kenya, let's pull together", have been used to signify patriotism and unity.

Figure 2.12: Meme 9

The words can be interpreted to mean that the trio in the meme should work together in unity for the common good of the country because they all belong to Kenya. *Harambee* is a Swahili word for working together in order to promote unity and it is usually used in contexts like fundraising where people are usually called upon to pull together for a common purpose in order for them to achieve a common goal.

The pictorials in the meme can be easily identified by the Kenyan audience. According to Ekesa et al., (2023), technology has enabled virtual artists to produce a hyper real copy courtesy of postmodernism and semiotics. The picture on the left in a greenish maternity dress represents the then Kenya Kwanza presidential candidate, William Ruto, at the centre is Uhuru Kenyatta's picture (the 4th President of the Republic of Kenya) and at the right end is the picture representing Azimio La Umoja party leader, Raila Odinga, who was also a presidential aspirant in the 2022 elections. The meme was circulated just before the August 2022 general elections in Kenya. The meme creator has humorously presented the two presidential aspirants as expectant women who are nearly giving birth. The picture in the meme also signifies that Uhuru

Kenyatta, the man in the picture, is responsible for the two pregnancies. It can therefore be interpreted that he is in a polygamous political relationship and as Ismail et al., (2021) argue, relationships have unique problems arising from jealousy between co-wives over the resources and affection of the husband. They are also characterized by conflicts, betrayal, envy and suspicion among others. The coming to term of the pregnancies in the meme symbolizes the birth of a new leadership which further implies a new nation after elections. A closer look at the meme also indicates that the success of one who will take over the leadership from the 4th president depends on the ability of the aspirants to carry the pregnancies to term and have successful delivery. The presentation of the two aspirants as co-wives can be interpreted as a text on its own highlighting the existing antagonism.

Furthermore, the two presidential aspirants pictured in Meme 9 are contrastingly dissimilar in a number of ways. First, the one to the left, who represents the former deputy president, William Ruto has worn a greenish dress. The lower side of this dress has been intentionally folded to show that 'she' is determined and ready for war. However, the one positioned on the right hand side wears a maternity dress that is almost similar in colour to what the 'supposed husband' wears. This gives the opinion that 'she' is closer to the husband than the rival. Of the two, she is the husband's favourite wife. This particularly happened after the political 'handshake' in Kenya in 2018 that brought in Raila into the marriage, leading to a fall out between the President and his then Deputy, William Ruto. The varied mode of dressing by the aspirants, signify that they belong to different parties. Contextually, the meme author informs the audience that the aspirant in blue attire and the 'supposed husband' (also adorned in the same colour), belonged to the same party popularly known as Azimio

La Umoja Coalition. While the aspirant in blue attire seems relaxed, the one on the left looks bitter a symbol of existing antagonism. Agreeing with the ideas relayed by the choice of colours in the meme, Yu (2014) associates the blue colour with calmness. A further interpretation of this meme gives a feeling that there could be a fall out between the boss and the aspirant in greenish attire, a reason that explains why she behaves indifferently. The choice of colour as a text by the meme author has been intentionally done to reveal the emotional states of the characters in the meme. According to Cowan (2015), green blue and yellow are considered as cold colours. In the meme, such a choice of green versus blue colours exposes the cold attitude of the aspirants towards each other.

In addition, the meme creator has intentionally used gestures to communicate the hidden meaning behind them in Meme 9 described. The two aspirants in the meme are almost equal in body size and weight. Each of them has placed one hand on the waist which connotes that they are equally strong contenders going by the number of followers that they have and their positions in their parties. This further gives the view that they are both politically strong. The act of each one of them holding their waist can be interpreted to suggest that they are both assertive and aggressive in nature. However, the one on the left side roughly holds the man's T-shirt in a manner that opines that 'she' is ready for a fight. This is because, the husband brought in a new wife yet she had fought hard to bring the family to place during the 2013 general elections. A closer look at the opponent however, reveals that 'she' is composed and contented. This is because after Raila was brought into the government, he was given more attention and the then president even went further to campaign for him to take over the presidency, since his second term was coming to an end. This gives the

reader a signal that ‘she’ is certain of the love the ‘husband’ has for her. The man in the meme remains slim while the ‘wives’ have put on weight and this leaves a gap for speculation from the audience that he is under some kind of pressure or rather that there is disagreement in the ‘family’ that has affected him to an extent that he has lost weight.

Sielki (1979) explains that body language can act as a complement to the verbal messages in communication. For instance in Meme 11, the pictorial helps the reader to understand the meaning conveyed in the written message. It reads: *Vile siku nikiacha hanasa na dhambi zote af nichaguliwe nikuwe church elder*. (The day I leave worldly pleasures and all sins then I be elected to become a church elder). The meme is a combination of both words and pictures chosen for a particular purpose. The verbal message, which is presented in the first person narrative voice, is a combination of Swahili and English. The picture of a fat young man helps the reader to comprehend the message and hence contextualize the meaning of the text. The big body size of the religious man in the meme suggests that the church elders are well fed and their dressing costs catered for. However, such positions, as insinuated by the meme author are associated with showing off. This is because according to the meme, the church elder holds a bible closer to his heart to announce that he is a holy man. A further interpretation of the picture also reveals that leadership positions in churches in Kenya today are believed to be associated with good things owing to the availability of funds in form of tithes and offerings.

To sum up, the use of intertextuality in memes has inspired the meme creators to communicate some specific themes to the online community. The use of pictures

alongside the words enhances a better understanding of the highlighted themes. Moreover, the idea of borrowing from or imitating other texts which the audience can identify with, allow them to decipher different meanings hence providing a rich interpretation of the text from a literary perspective. In addition, intertextuality builds up creativity of both the writer and the reader of the meme. This is because the writer deliberately chooses particular texts in their work so as to attract the attention of the readers. On the other hand, the recipient of the meme has to contextualize the interpretation of the text in relation to the other texts and this enhances individual creativity as they do not rely on the meme source to get its meaning. Finally, by using intertextuality in memes, the author is able to express complex ideas through minimum space and effectively reach out to his/her audience within a short period of time.

2.11 Conclusion

The chapter concludes that the memes shared by Kenyans contain aesthetic features such as satire, allusion and symbolism among others. These literary features enrich the beauty and meaning of memes hence enabling the online community to understand and relate to the issues raised by the authors. Such aesthetically constructed memes empower the reader's creative impetus making them draw connections between ideas relayed contextually. Memes, like other forms of literature, are made up of aesthetic features which qualify them to be classified as part of the sub-genre of social media literature.

CHAPTER THREE

THE KENYAN NATION THROUGH THE LENSES OF CLICHES AND STEREOTYPES

3.1 Overview

This chapter focuses on how memes exhibit the existence of stereotypes and clichés in Kenya. It examines the Kenyan nation as a stereotype and how memes reveal the prevailing ethnic, as well as gender clichés. Furthermore, the chapter brings to the fore the generalizations made by Kenyans about politics, religion and professions such as the medics and the police. Finally, it discusses how the memes portray the Kenyan students in general.

3.2 Introduction

Different scholars have come up with various explanations for the term stereotype. According to Franzoi (2000) a stereotype refers to a certain way of thinking about people that places them in categories which in turn results in limited individual variation. From the same perspective, Kadida (2010) also posits that stereotypes are widespread ideas about features attributed to individuals within a specific group. Stereotypes are born out of the habitual nature of human beings to classify everyone and everything around them. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines a cliché as something that has been said several times that it has become common place. Some scholars argue that cliché is synonymous to stereotype. This is because repeated generalizations about specific groups result in verbal or even mental clichés.

In their argument, Naituli and King'oro (2018) further explain that stereotyping starts with classification of individuals into two groups namely: 'us' and 'them'. Therefore, the negative traits are assigned to the 'other' while the constructive ones are assigned to the in-group (us). Once this happens, there is a likelihood of one maintaining these stereotypes for generations over. People can be categorized according to religion, gender, profession, ethnic groups, nationality, age, ability and race among others. Generalizations may turn into stereotypes when all the members in a group are attributed to similar features or traits. Negative stereotyping may result in an intentional bias because it limits how we interpret and respond to who others are or what they do (Somerville, 2011). Moreover, Nieto (2006) claims that when incorrect features are assigned to a certain group of people, it hinders the other members who do not belong to the in-group (the out-group) from looking at their true perception.

In Kenya, social media platforms have provided forums for people to interact and share generalized assumptions based on social categorizations through circulation of the internet memes. Cultural exchange which is done through the sharing of internet memes has given room for the production of ethnic stereotypes. Brigam (1971) argues that generalizations based on ethnicity result in negative attitude by a group towards another and this eventually leads to unjustified discrimination exercised by one group against another. These repeated generalizations result in clichés. This chapter therefore discusses the depiction of the Kenyan nation through stereotypes and clichés expressed in memes.

3.3 The Kenyan Nation as a Stereotype

The Kenyan nation is made up of divergent cultures, a factor attributed to more than forty two ethnic groups (Ogechi, 2019). The two main official languages in Kenya are Kiswahili and English. However, most of the citizens understand their first language and prefer using Kiswahili to English in their social setting. Some Kenyans particularly the youth in urban settings communicate using *sheng,* a slang that is generally preferred on social media. The internet community in Kenya is made up of different categories of people who uphold varied opinions and beliefs and the memes circulated by these groups reveal significant information of their perception of specific ethnic groups in the country.

The onset of stereotyping in Africa is mainly attributed to colonialism (Aguugo & Osunwa, 2023). The authors also argue that European settlers created negative stereotypes about Africa by playing 'mental supremacy' games and as such, Africans were secluded and considered as the 'others.' While the Europeans were considered wise and civilized, the African was perceived as foolish, barbaric and uncivilized. As a result of racial stereotyping, African countries and their leadership are still perceived as poor and thought to be associated with political instability, coups and counter- coups in addition to poor economic policies (Achebe, 2010). In Kenya, ethnic and racial stereotyping is traced to the divide and rule strategy of the British colonial administration (Ogechi, 2019; Shilaho, 2018).

In comparison to their Western counterparts, stereotyping has affected the performance and image of African countries, Kenya included. Kenya is perceived by the West as a third world country thus categorized among the African countries in

need of foreign aid. In Meme 2, Kenya is humorously painted as a vulnerable country while its leadership is considered to be hypocritical and materialistic. The meme is presented as follows: *80,000 vulnerable Kenyans who lost income sources due to covid-19 set to receive Ksh. 606 M from E.U.*

There is a picture of an index finger pointing at an image below the written text as a vulnerable Kenyan. In the meme, the feminized image of the Kenyan leader represents Kenya as a country since the president is a symbol of a nation. The bent and fragile posture signifies her inability to work as expected and therefore this implies that she is considered to be needy. Her gender status also gives the reader the implication that she is no longer productive and as such entirely depends on other people to assist her make a living. However, she has lipstick and this gives a feeling that she can afford some luxuries and therefore may not necessarily need the financial aid from the EU.

In addition, the image is presented against a greenish agricultural background as opposed to the expected harsh dry climatic conditions. According to Smith (2018), green colour in Kenyan context symbolizes fertile land. This gives the perception that the prevailing weather or climatic conditions are favourable for farming and as such, the donations are considered unnecessary. In the meme, the author seems to satirize the Kenyan leadership who are believed to be wearing masks of poverty in order to benefit from foreign aid. This is in spite of the country known to have resources that can sustain its populace. The creator has used this meme to bring to the fore the stereotype of Kenya, an African country considered to be prone to foreign aid due to her inability to meet her own domestic needs particularly following the outbreak of

the COVID-19 pandemic. The arguments disclosed through this meme agree with Moreno-Ameida's (2021) sentiments that the online community use memes as a form of protest against the leadership in place.

In equal measure, Meme 1 portrays a government and a leadership that is believed to be exploitative and driven by greed. The meme creator can be said to be expounding on suggestions earlier made by Kulkarni (2017) that the internet memes are used as weapons to mock insensitive governments and political regimes. The meme illustrates a picture of a thin man who has wrapped his lower part of the body in a Kenyan flag, an indication that he is a Kenyan citizen. He is carrying a very heavy government that he can barely lift on his back. As a result of the heavy weight, the man bends to accommodate it. The man carries another fat man labeled government. The government is dressed in clean clothes, tie and shoes but ironically, it cannot walk to give the poor fellow a chance to rest. Interestingly, the government in turn carries a big heavy bag tagged taxes on his back. While his right hand holds the heavy bag of taxes, the government uses his left hand to extract some traces of bones from a standing bony horse. The small poor man represents Kenyan citizens who, according to the meme, are burdened by the payment of huge taxes. The bent posture of the man gives the opinion that Kenyans are oppressed by the taxes imposed on them.

A further interpretation also gives a feeling that the Kenyan citizens no longer do anything else to support their livelihoods but ferry the government by paying taxes. The fat man in form of a government represents the leadership in Kenya as revealed by the mode of dressing and huge body size. This picture conveys the view that the leadership has no feelings for the masses who are struggling to keep them in their

political positions. The huge bag of taxes gives the readers a perception that the government is insatiable financially as it keeps coming for more. The horse represents the common people believed to have been taxed to the bones. The government orders the horse to hold on to allow him remove some bones from its body. Even though the horse is almost dying since there is no more flesh in it, as seen in the picture, the government does not relent but goes for its bones. The meme gives the implication that much as the citizens are suffering as portrayed through the horse in the meme, the leaders are comfortable and happy as revealed by the huge smiling man on the back of the small one. The meme therefore exposes a government perceived to be uncaring for its own citizens. The author of the above text propagates Friday and Fredrick's (2022) proposition that memes mirror the existing conditions in a country.

Similarly, Meme 15 earlier presented, is a stereotype of the Kenya government that is perceived by the citizens as harsh and oppressive. The meme is presented as follows: *Kenyan government approaching citizens for more taxes*. The information in the text is supported by a picture of very thin cow than can barely stand and a happy milkman who is approaching the cow with so many cans of milk. The emaciated cow represents Kenyans thought to have been starved by the government through over-taxation. The milkman represents the government who comes with a lot of milking cans even when the cow seems too weak to stand on its own. The meme creates a picture that the Kenyan citizens have been highly taxed that they can hardly put food on their table. In a humorous way, the meme help Kenyans to cope with the hard economic times, an idea supported by Gardener et al., (2021) in their study asserting that memes assist individuals cope with painful realities in life.

In general, the memes reveal that Kenyan citizens feel that the government has failed them by not listening to their grievances. According to Munuku (2022), memes are used to criticize and even caution particular individuals and institutions in any given society. This shows that Kenyan citizens represented by various voices in the memes have resorted to online platforms to express their discontent with their government. The message communicated through these memes suggests that there is need for a change in government policies so that the citizens are involved in decision making particularly on tax matters. Through the use of memes, the authors opine that Kenyans have lost confidence in their government.

3.4 How Ethnic Stereotypes Embedded in Memes Mirror Existing Conditions

The internet memes as shared across social media platforms in Kenya expose the existence of ethnic stereotypes and clichés. Ethnicity in Kenya was established when the Europeans divided the country along ethnic lines creating breeding grounds for tribal prejudice (Branch, 2011). This was purposefully done to prevent Africans from fighting for liberation, Oucho (2002). Majority of the Agikuyu and Luo accessed education earlier than the others (Hornsby, 2013). In the 1960's, there emerged tensions between Kenyatta and the vice president, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. Matters were made worse when Mboya was assassinated, with the government being blamed an act that forced the Luo to form the opposition (Ajulu, 2002). As a result, the Luo people were stereotyped as rebellious (Hornsby 2013, p.258).

According to Naituli and King'oro (2018), ethnic stereotypes in Kenya reveal both the positive and negative features of one group against another but there is no evidence of conflict that arise as a result. They further suggest that communities make

generalizations about others based on culture. The authors also opine that even though such perceptions are usually not true, it is always not easy to change since they are highly internalized in the minds of various individuals within an in- group. This sub-section therefore discusses how Kenyans make generalizations about other ethnic groups as portrayed through memes.

Kenyans have a tendency of framing other communities by using coded language to exclude those who do not understand the language (Naituri & King'oro, 2018). Coded language is expressed through irony, imagery and proverbs to protect the members of the in-group against those who do not speak the language, the out-group (Holtgaves & Kashima, 2008). The internet memes as agents of communication in Kenya also disclose the presence of ethnic stereotypes and clichés. Meme 4 highlights generalizations made about the Abaluhya, an ethnic group from the Western part of Kenya. The meme contains both pictorials and written texts. In the meme, there are pictures of two boys conversing. The one who is seated on a green plastic chair and has a potbelly asks, *"So you're saying a one bedroom in Kakamega is 4K*?" and the one standing bends closer to the speaker and replies, "*but ikiwa karibu na poshomill ni 15K*". The addressee means that if the one bed-roomed house is closer to a poshomill, then it is worth Kshs.15000 instead of Kshs. 4,000.

Figure 3.1: Meme 4

The Abaluhya community in Kenya is perceived to prioritize food above other basic needs. That is why in the conversation concerning the cost of rent, a house located far away from a maize grinding mill is cheaper (4000 Kenyan shillings) while the one closer to it is expensive (15,000 Kenyan Shillings). The meme reflects a belief that the community can afford to pay more as long as they can easily access food. The Abaluhya in Kenya are popularly known for their preference for *ugali (*Kenyan staple food made from ground maize flour) served with chicken meat. These are sentiments shared by Nieto (2006) who posits that the community is known for the same meal.

A further examination of the above community's preference for food is expounded by Giles and Ogay (2007) in their argument that the Abaluhyas are stereotypically deemed as consumers of chicken. This is clearly captured in Meme 22 above. The meme contains an image of a christmas tree populated with various breeds of live chicken. This shows that the celebration in this community is believed to be incomplete without chicken meat on their menu. The pictures of several hens and cockerels depict the magnitude of the celebration and also reveal the social status associated with this community. Unlike in this community, an ordinary christmas tree in other communities in Kenya is made up of a tree decorated with flowers. From the sampled memes, it is evident that the Abaluhya people are generally perceived to love eating *ugali* and chicken in particular. These commentaries are repetitively circulated across the social media platforms and have therefore become clichés. This kind of framing may not however give a true picture of the Abaluhya community because a majority of Kenyans across the ethnic divide love chicken. Furthermore, Jayne and Argwings-Kodhek (1997) support the argument that *ugali* is considered a staple food in the entire country and this means the meal is consumed by a majority of Kenyans.

Another ethnic group that features in most of the memes shared by Kenyans is the Luo. This is a community that occupies the Western part of Kenya particularly around the Lake Victoria. Existing literature shows that other Kenyan communities associate the Luo community with specific traits and behavioural standards that single them out. Kidha (2023) opines that the Agikuyu perceive the Luo as extravagant and self-centred. As such the Agikuyu, as the author reveals, believe that the Luo cannot invest their money in a responsible way because it is in their nature to over-indulge. A look at the memes circulated discloses a similarity in terms of how Kenyans perceive the Luo people and how the community rates itself in relation to the 'others.'

While seeming to elaborate the above sentiments, Meme 27 which reads: *HOW LUOS ARE PREVENTING CORONA VIRUS,* brings out the general perception of the Luo people by the other communities in Kenya. The meme contains a picture of a person using a thousand shillings note as a face mask. The note has been placed to cover the mouth and the nose to protect the victim from catching the corona virus. The notion that we get from the picture is that the man is wealthy and prestigious. The period following the outbreak of COVID -19 pandemic in the country was the most difficult one since many people were affected economically as a result of the curfew and other restrictions imposed by the government to curb the spread of disease. As a result, a number of Kenyans lost their income and financial stability. Ironically, the Luos as shown in the meme could still afford to show off by using a thousand shillings note as a face mask. This, in comparison to *Meme 18* which contains a picture of a Kenyan using leaves tied together as a face mask against the same virus. The two memes reveal that the Luo like elevating their status which creates a perception associating

them with opulence. This meme therefore confirms Kidha's (2023) arguments that the Luo people are understood to be pompous in nature and enjoy exhibitionism.

In the same vein, Meme 36 reveals that the Luo community in Kenya are seen as an elitist group. The meme reads: *THERE ARE ONLY TWO TRIBES IN KENYA, THE LUOS AND THE OTHERS*. The words are accompanied by a picture of conjoined faces of the former President of the U.S., Barrack Obama. The faces are however supported by a single neck and body. The association of the Luo tribe with the office of the presidency in America in the meme gives a notion that they occupy a higher position in the social ranking compared to the others. This belief is explained by Morrison (2007) who asserts that the Luo people have internalized a false belief that they are intellectually and politically superior.

The meme author has used an image of the former President of the United States of America, Barrack Obama because he descended from the Luo community in Kenya. His biological father was a Kenyan of Luo origin. As such, the meme can be interpreted to associate the Luo community with the highest office in a country believed to be among the most powerful in the world. Obama's picture in the meme therefore is seen to signify the community's status quo and intellectual capacity. The meme thus echoes Ajulu's (2002) declaration that the Luo people are considered to be intelligent in comparison to the other ethnic groups in Kenya. By foregrounding their superiority and jesting about the inferiority of the other people, the community uses such memes to express their nature as a proud people. Such perceptions as presented in the memes are however not true since stereotypes have very little reality in them.

This is because we have intelligent and prestigious individuals from other communities too.

The Luo community is not the only one satirized or satirizes other people and situations. Some of the memes shared by Kenyans pinpoint the observations that they attribute to the Agikuyu, a community that is mostly found in Central Kenya and parts of the Rift Valley. According to Ndonyo et.al, (2015), tribal jokes paint the Agikuyu as crafty business people who do not easily give out chances to other communities. Meme 45 agrees with these sentiments as it portrays the Agikuyu as business-minded people. The meme reads: *Wakikuyu mnakuwanga free saa ngapi, At what time do you kikuyu kikuyu free*. The translation is that the meme interrogates if at all the Agikuyu people ever get free time. In the meme, there are pictures of two women drawn from the Agikuyu ethnic group as implied by the written text. They have boarded a vehicle at night and they are busy peeling peas as they converse. This can be interpreted to mean that they are making preparations for the following day. Ironically, some of the passengers are asleep while the others are not engaged in any other activity since it is already dark. The meme suggests that the Agikuyu are aggressive in their search for money. A further interpretation of the meme gives the opinion that they do not waste any available opportunity. The meme further implies that this community is believed to be hard working and as revealed they cannot take darkness as an excuse to bar them from engaging in a fruitful activity.

On the same note, Meme 41 comments on the same community. It reads: *eti wakikuyu wanaendanga kupeleka dowry past noon ndio wauziwe msichana na bei ya jioni*. The translation of the meme is that the Agikuyu people go for their marriage negotiations

late in the afternoon so that they can be allowed to pay less bride price. Below the written text is a picture of a young boy laughing as he exposes his toothless gums. He closes his eyes as he laughs in wonder and he holds both his hands closer to the chest. In the Kenyan context, marriage negotiations are usually done early enough so that the parties involved can reach an agreement on time. However, the meme reveals that when the Agikuyu community is involved, they prefer to arrive late at the venue. This late arrival could be interpreted to mean that the Agikuyu want the negotiations done hurriedly and in the long run pay a favourable dowry. It could also mean that they do not want to engage in unnecessary arguments that would consume their time. The meme associates the Agikuyu with being spartan, frugal and thrift in their management and use of money

Figure 3.2: Meme 41

Similar sentiments given above about the Agikuyu community are echoed by the author of meme 53. It reads: *A kikuyu man will finish his wedding by 3:30p.m and still open his shop by 4p.m*. The words are accompanied by a picture of a man in a navy blue suit with a new wedding ring on his left index finger to signify that he was just from a wedding ceremony. Eunson (2012) associates brand clothes and jewelry with wealth and status. It can therefore be concluded that the man has money. He is inside a shop busy cutting his fingernails and the expression on his stern face in the meme

gives the impression that he is becoming impatient with the delay of his customers. A deeper scrutiny of his posture, gesture and the entire body language could give the reader of the meme the implication that he wants to recoup the money spent during the wedding ceremony. This is consistent with the postmodernist perspective that elements of culture such as language, symbols and values can be interpreted so as to understand the underlying meaning in a text (Barthes, 1977). The two related memes about the Agikuyu approve the assertions made by Naituli and King'oro (2018) in their research that other communities in Kenya such as the Aembu, stereotype the Agikuyu as money- loving and enterprising people.

Similarly, memes have been used to reveal the measure of trustworthiness associated with specific communities in Kenya. Meme 43 places the Agikuyu on the social weighing machine against trust/ mistrust. The meme reads: *Barrack, pahali tunapitia / sasa ni Githurai…/Hapa unakaa rada mtu /Hutext phone ikiwaa kwa mfuko*. The translation is that the message sounds a warning to Barrack to be careful in *Githurai* estate so that should he want to text, he should do so while the phone is safely kept inside the pocket.

Figure 3.3: Meme 43

The pictorials contain the images of the former U.S. President Barrack Obama and other officials peeping through a glass window inside a building. Githurai is an urban centre hosting a number of the Agikuyu residents in Kenya. The text sounds as a warning to Barrack and the others to be extra careful because they are in a place perceived to be associated with theft. Barrack's utterance of the word *Jesus!* in the meme gives the reader the implication that he is extremely surprised by what is going on outside the building. The meme also shows that fear is written all over the faces of these subjects and this gives an opinion that the surrounding proves dangerous than they had anticipated.

A further interpretation of this meme could mean that thieves have no respect for the social class that a victim belongs to. The opinions expressed in the meme echo the suggestions by Hornsby (2013, p.258) that the Agikuyu community was stereotyped as grabbers and untrustworthy. This perception is historically rooted and the author purports that it was born out of the act of Kenya's first government resettling the Agikuyu community in the former British lands that originally belonged to the Kalenjin community. While examining Kenya's history since independence, Kweyu (2022) similarly observes that the Kalenjin community referred to the Agikuyu as thieves because they explained that they stole their land in the Eastern part of the Mau.

The above stereotypes as King'oro and Mureithi (2022) assert, are usually exaggerated thus this study can argue that the inherent clichés in memes give a false perception about the Agikuyu community. In essence, there exist entrepreneurs in other communities too. Equally, thievery is a vice discouraged in all cultures and

communities in Kenya, it is therefore not true to attach the same to one specific community. Moreover, everybody in the country for instance the love money and therefore this is an attribute that cuts across all the communities in Kenya.

Equally, the generalizations about other communities in Kenya like the Kalenjin have been clearly brought out through the use of memes. The Kalenjin refers to a group of Nilotic speaking people who are mostly found in the Rift Valley region of the country. It is a large group made up of about seven sub-tribes that are culturally and linguistically related. Studies have shown that communities in Kenya engage in tribal jokes as a form of humour (Naituri & King'oro, 2018). The authors also opine that other communities associate the Kalenjin community in Kenya with long ears. Interestingly, the circulated memes in Kenya also reveal that the community is associated with long teeth. Meme 55: *Nimekutana na dogi mkale Bomet* associates the Kalenjin community with long teeth. The translation is that the speaker met a Kalenjin dog in Bomet. The text appears with a picture of a dog that has opened its mouth revealing long teeth on the front upper and lower jaws. Bomet is a town in the southern part of the Rift Valley region of Kenya which is purely occupied by the Kalenjin community. The perception that the meme author has about the Kalenjin and their long protruding front teeth makes the meme creator associate the dog met in Bomet with similar teeth with the Kalenjin ethnic group. The dog is thus playfully named a Kalenjin dog by the meme creator. According to Laineste and Voolaid (2017), memes act as carriers of internet humour that elicit laughter across borders. It would therefore be interesting if the meme creator could as well provide a list of dogs linked to specific Kenyan communities like the Agikuyu, Luo and Abaluhya among others. Holland (2020) also agrees that memes unite people through shared laughter.

Some memes have been used to satirize the problematic mispronunciation of some English sounds by the native speakers in Kenya. This is well explained in a research by Toci (2020) who argues that by virtue of English being a second language in Africa, the Kenyan speakers are usually faced with difficulties in pronunciation due to the absence of direct contact with the language and lack of self-confidence. This is revealed in Meme 28: *Meet David Arap Chepseon, the first Kalenjin to pronounce the word 'DATA' in 1866. He died immediately*. The meme contains a picture of a baldheaded African man. His mouth is closed and his big eyes are directed towards some object just above him. He looks serious and tensed.

The meme exposes the difficulty experienced by some of the Kalenjin speakers in pronouncing some of the English words or sounds like / d/ which is often mispronounced as /t/ by the community. The open gaze by the man in the meme could be interpreted to reveal the surprise or shock that he went through upon successfully pronouncing the word 'data.' This assertion is supported by Eunson (2012) who believes that facial expressions in non- verbal communication expose our emotional states. The man in the meme is about 50 years old making the pronunciation even more challenging due to his age. By declaring that the speaker in the meme died immediately after pronouncing the word, the author, through exaggeration insinuates that the entire process of getting the correct pronunciation was torturous. Nyatuka (2021) asserts that limited proficiency in the English language often results in frustrations and hatred towards it. While echoing the sentiments expressed by the meme author, Muthwi (1994) argues that the Kalenjin community may not have inculcated set of motor habits relevant to producing the English sounds. On the same

note, Kabellow et al., (2020) agree that most Kenyans have a difficulty in pronouncing some English words.

It is therefore worth noting that the problem of mispronunciation of the English words in the Kenyan context cuts across a majority of the linguistic communities because English is not their first language. Oseno et al., (2014) agree that the speaking of English in Kenya is often characterized by mother tongue interference. However, it is understood that perfecting the pronunciation of some of the words in English is a challenge to many Kenyans. For instance, some of the Bantu speakers usually replace sound /l/ for /r/ and vice versa. However, within the Kalenjin community, we have people who can articulate the English words very well and it would be therefore wrong to attach mispronunciation to the entire community.

Furthermore, the above community is also associated with long distance running. According to Rotich (2016), the Kalenjin community is stereotyped as the Kenyan 'running tribe'. The author explains that this is because 69% of the Kenyan runners come from the Kalenjin community. The study further claims that such positive stereotyping has played a key role in enhancing athletic identity and as such the Kalenjin community is synonymous with long distance running. Meme 59 significantly supports the sentiments, associating this community with athletics. The meme reads: *MOST OF THE WORLD'S FASTEST RUNNERS* COME *FROM A SINGLE TRIBE IN KENYA, AFRICA, CALLED THE "KALENJINS"* The written text is accompanied by pictures of three athletes holding the Kenyan flags after emerging victorious in a competition. The athletes as presented in the meme are a happy lot, and this gives a feeling that they generate prestige and pride due to their running prowess.

As such, running has therefore become a form of ethnic identity. The clichés presented in the meme are believed to be true given the percentage of the Kalenjin runners in Kenya. Notably, the community boasts of more successful athletes in comparison to the others because they do practice in high altitude owing to the nature of their geographical settlement. Harrison et al., (2002) support this argument by positing that physical activity, attitudes and choices are connected to ethnic identity.

To sum up, ethnic stereotyping portrayed through the use of memes in Kenya can be said to enhance unity by promoting cultural diversity. Such stereotypes contain both positive and negative aspects of a community. The humour involved in such stereotypes builds a common understanding among the citizens thereby creating a sense of identity and belonging since they share the same nation much as they have their own linguistic identities. It is also evident from the reactions and the likes shared by the online audience that ethnic stereotypes and clichés do not give rise to conflicts because they appreciate and accept the perception attributed to the various communities. In agreement, Ndonye et al. (2015) point out that such tribal jokes enable Kenyans to poke fun at themselves. Therefore ethnic stereotyping contained in memes is not a divisive but a unifying factor in Kenya since it enables the netizens to celebrate the online cultural diversity hence acts as a repertoire of Kenya's culture.

3.5 How Memes Portray Gender in Kenya

Butler (2006) defines gender as a set of acts performed several times within a rigid regulatory framework. The gender theorist further opines that gender is a product of social construct and as such, it is not tied to biology. Generally, society perceives men/boys differently from women/girls and this has inadvertently led to the creation

of social stereotypes which in some way dictates the behaviour of individuals in particular social contexts. This agrees with the opinions given by Eagly (1987) who also believes that gender stereotypes result from the social roles assigned to both men and women. These sentiments are supported by Alunga and William (2023) in their argument that gender roles are confirmed social and behavioural norms within culture deemed appropriate for specific gender. However, Kariba et al., (2022) note that the existence of socially constructed norms coupled with religious beliefs hinders development in a given community. Gender stereotyping is evident in the social media space as revealed through the use of memes in Kenya.

To begin with, Meme 20 insinuates that men are unfaithful in relationships. The meme is written as follows: *UKIWA HEAVEN JUDGEMENT DAY ALAFU WAMAMA WA PLOTI WAITWE KAMA WITNESS WA KESI YAKO*. When translated to English, the picture foreshadows the final judgment day, when God will deal with the sinners and the women who had lived with this man (on the picture) in the same neighbourhood shall be called upon to testify against his promiscuous character. The meme contains a picture of a man seated uncomfortably on a chair. He holds onto some support with both hands, one to the sides and the other hand to the front as if he wants to stand but some forces are pinning him down. He stares ahead of him in surprise as portrayed by his open mouth and erect ears. The meme could be interpreted to mean that the man is surprised to see all the women he had related with in the same neighbourhood during such a time. The activities that he may have engaged in with some of the women may be immoral or wayward in nature, a reason why he dreads facing them. Moreover, most of those activities could have been done in the comfort of darkness and as such, exposing them during the day in the presence

of God causes embarrassment to the suspect. This meme stereotypes men as cheats and women as people who cannot be trusted to keep secrets.

Similarly, Meme 56 reveals the notion that some of the Kenyan men are considered to be unfaithful to their spouses. The meme reads: *After a wife discovers a blouse in the car and the husband is forced to wear it to prove it is his new shirt*. In the pictorial, is an angry looking bespectacled man who wears a blue blouse and he pockets. The design and shape of the 'shirt' shows that it belongs to a woman therefore, he looks odd in it.

It can be argued that since the blouse in the meme does not belong to the man's wife, then it belongs to another woman the man has a relationship with. The meme also gives the interpretation that the man has lied to his wife that the new blouse belongs to him, that is why he has be forced to put it on as a proof. While examining body language, Eunson (2012) agrees with the behaviour of the man in the meme that by looking away, he disapproves being forced to wear the blouse by the wife. The seriousness portrayed on his face is a veil to cover his wayward tendencies. Beneath the serious face is the anger of being caught red handed and the guilt of unfaithfulness. Studies by Rokach and Chan (2023) reveal that men behave in a more permissive way towards extramarital affairs than women do and this tends to create anger and resentment expressed towards a spouse.

The two memes about men and cheating in relationship however, reveal that as much as they do so, they do not escape unnoticed. The message relayed in the meme agrees with the existing research by Haseli et al., (2019) that there is a higher tendency of

men engaging in unfaithful behaviour. The moral brought to the fore through this meme is that relationships should be respected at all costs by the parties involved. It is also worth noting that the generalizations about men as cheats is subject to debate because whenever a man is unfaithful in a relationship, another woman is involved. Therefore, we also have women who cheat in heterosexual relationships.

Existing gender disparity in Kenya has also been highlighted through the use of memes. Memes paint men as domineering and economically exploitative. It is believed that colonialism legitimized male domination through Christianity by encouraging women to be submissive to men (Nyangweso, 2020; Biegon, 2018). This idea is clearly captured by Meme 31: *A wife'salary should be paid directly into the husband's account*.

Figure 3.4: Meme 31

The words are accompanied by pictures of a group of men standing somewhere. The speaker, who emanates from the group, utters the words above while pointing with his index finger for emphasis. The statement made by this speaker creates a perception that a woman should work but at the end of the month, her salary belongs to her husband. This meme brings to the fore what is considered the height of economic abuse that women go through in the family set up in Kenya.

The interpretation of the meme further insinuates that men control the finances of women leading to their suffering and the eventual curtailment of their financial independence. Previous studies explain the disparity by asserting that men and women were still unequal in terms of bargaining power as the traditional structure that considered men as providers gave them more power compared to the women (Volger et al., 2008). The picture of the man speaking in the meme makes the observer conclude that he is domineering, assertive and inhuman since he does not seem to care about the feelings of the woman he is referring to. The picture shows a meeting attended by men only and the speaker seems to be inciting the other men against the women in general. This implies that even though they are discussing about the salaries of women, the subjects being discussed (women) are absent. Their absence brings to perspective the inferior positions that women hold in patriarchal societies. In such societies, decision making is done exclusively by men. Women are expected to implement such decisions without question, further revealing the perceived chauvinistic nature of men in the Kenyan cultural context. Such gender imbalance as Awuor et al., (2021) explain, has its origin in colonialism where boys were given preferential treatment in the missionary schools as opposed to the girls who never got such an opportunity.

Apart from exposing the existing issues on relationships, memes have been used to satirize particular behaviours attributed to men in the Kenyan society. Memes reveal that some Kenyan men are believed to be generally lazy and by extension dirty. They do not observe personal hygiene the reason why they prefer putting on clothes repetitively without washing them. This is brought to fore through Meme 44: *Mwanaume akivaa nguo siku moja Alafu anaosha ni umama…Valia nguo Hadi*

uchafu ipige duru (If a man puts on clothes once and then washes them he womanly, a man should wear clothes till dirt is loud). The utterance comes from a dignified person, a picture of the Ugandan president, Museveni. He wears a yellow shirt that matches the round hat on his head. The meme author purposively uses a dignitary in this context to bring out the view that the ordinary man would even be worse in recycling clothes. Such behaviour in meme is attributed to gender roles where certain tasks are assigned to men and women (Anggeria, 2019). As such, some men consider the act of washing clothes as a woman's affair.

Other speculations about Kenyan women are also captured through memes, even though most of them are negatively connoted. Some memes authors portraay women as gossipers. According to Robinson (2016), gossiping involves divulging amusing information about a third party. Other scholars such as McDonald et al. (2017) categorize gossip as a malicious talk which may affect a third person negatively. Meme 35 which reads: *WOMEN WILL ALWAYS BE WOMEN. YOU CAN'T TAKE AWAY GOSSIP FROM THEM. EVEN WHEN THEY ARE PASTORS, THEY WILL ALWAYS BE LIKE:'' LET'S REMEMBER SISTER AMAKA IN PRAYERS SHE HAS HIV,"* reflects the above assertion.

Figure 3.5: Meme 35

The written text is accompanied by pictures of two women, one of them who purportedly is the pastor has bent her head so as to closely whisper to another woman's ear. The close proximity between the two gives the impression that the message is confidential. The other woman receiving the information opens her mouth wide in surprise. This could be interpreted to mean that she is wondering how someone could be infected with HIV and AIDS at the church. They however look at one direction, which could be the place where the victim, Amaka, is seated at the church. The meme is a pastiche in that a part from the pictorials of the two women, we also have an animation. The overall outside clothing worn shows that it is a human with very thin legs and hands but the face has been camouflaged in the amphibian head. This is used by the meme creator to represent Amaka, a conclusion arrived at because of the way the two women whisper, avoiding her. She sits alone and her health is presumed to have deteriorated. Though seated at some distance, she seems to be listening to the conversation between the two ladies. The gossip in the meme could be classified as negative as pointed out by Kurland and Pelled (2000) in their argument that negative gossip contains unpleasant news while positive one is about something good about a third party.

A closer look at Amaka in the meme gives a feeling that she is stigmatized and as Robinson (2016) above explains, gossip can cause a stereotype threat particularly when one is reminded of being a member of a negatively perceived group which in this case refers to the HIV/ AIDS victim. The meme gives a perception that women are regarded as their own enemies in the society. However as Eyal and Batia (2017) suggest, both men and women engage in equal amount of gossiping activity. Therefore the activity is not limited to women alone. The variation as the authors

explain is that women base their gossip on social relationships and physical looks while men base theirs on socio-political issues. It can therefore be concluded that the meme seeks to warn other women from engaging in what is perceived as promiscuity and corresponds to the sentiments raised by Alfano and Robinson (2017) that gossiping may be allowed if it comes from a trusted source and serves as a warning to those who engage in wrong doing. Their arguments are also supported by Watson (2011) who observes that a negative gossip is associated with a behaviour that lacks approval in a given context.

In addition, meme authors paint a negative perception of some of the Kenyan girls as easy going. This was particularly common on the memes circulated on Facebook. This is captured in Meme 57 which reads as follows: *Madem wa sikuizi ni kama makarao unakutana nao kidogo uko ndani.* This translated to English means that the girls today easily give in to the sexual advances of men. Below the written words is a picture of a man who has placed his hands behind his head. He is looking at some object at a close proximity as he smiles. The word *Madem and Makarao* is slang ladies and police officers respectively.

The meme creator has playfully incorporated the use of slang and figurative language to draw comparison between ladies in Kenya and police officers. With reference to the police in Kenya, the meaning relayed by the words in the meme is that those who play around with the police find themselves in prison immediately. Police officers oppress people on flimsy reasons just like some ladies in Kenya give in to men's sexual advances very easily. Once in custody, the police extort their victims in their quest to secure freedom. Similarly, once some ladies enter into relationships with

men, they demand to be taken care of on their terms. The man in the meme is smiling and this gives a perception that he is fascinated by the behaviour of such girls. He has clasped his hands together behind his head and stares suggestively. His body language opines that he also has interest in the girls. The posture could also signify that as a man, he is not threatened and does not fear 'getting in'. Since it takes two to *tango*, whenever a girl is easy going, it means there is a man who is an exact replica. This is because the process is believed to engage both of them, not just the girl as indicated in the meme.

In conclusion, gender stereotyping in memes exposes that Kenya a patriarchal society whereby a man takes the superior position of decision making and other sociocultural activities both within and outside the home. Stereotyping based on gender reveals some truths as far as the social issues in Kenya are concerned. For instance, the place of a woman in the Kenyan patriarchal set up is clearly brought out through the memes. Even though some of the incidents are intentionally exaggerated by the meme creators, the message relayed is that Kenya should reconsider shifting from the traditional male dominated society and embrace social equity by exercising the gender rule.

Most of the memes present Kenyan men negatively a pointer to gender imbalance in the society. Although the meme authors posit that some men are cheats, there are several men who are true to their spouses. We also have men in Kenya who advocate for gender equity by assisting their spouses in house chores, an area traditionally reserved for women. However, the message from the author calls for the empowerment of women both socially and economically.

Gender stereotyping influences behaviour of men and women in Kenya as revealed through the use of memes. It predetermines the expected way in which a specific person may have to behave as dictated by the society such that if a man for example is unfaithful in marriage, the society is seen to protect him and his behaviour escapes unpunished because of the perception that the society has about men as naturally polygamous. A woman who engages in immorality on the other hand is admonished and harshly treated by the society. As such gender stereotyping may culminate into some form of gender bias perpetrated against the 'other' sex and as Stewart et al., (2021) suggests, the society should avoid reinforcing outdated gender stereotypes and norms.

3.6 Memes and Political Generalizations

According to Paolucci et al., (2023), stereotypes determine how we perceive the world and therefore they cannot be avoided. As such, the digital community in Kenya is fond of circulating memes revealing the perceived character that they attribute to the political leaders in the country. Such generalizations cut across the gender, ethnic and religious boundaries placing the political class under one presumed category.

Kasirye (2019) argues that the exposure of the citizens to political memes give them an opportunity to comment on political issues. This study established that memes reveal the prevailing attitude that Kenyans in general hold towards their leadership. This is clearly brought out in Meme 10: *NOBODY is going back to BONDO or SUGOI, Wanarudi KAREN! Utarudi kupambana na rent ukitembea on foot kama siafu*. Which translates to the opinion that none of the politicians will go back to the villages regardless of the outcome of the elections (in 2022) because all of them

would converge at Karen a common residential area inhabited mostly by the political class in Kenya. The meaning of the words is expounded by pictures of several political leaders gathered at some place as they read newspapers. The meme can be seen as a warning to the electorates that after the general elections, they will return to their normal lives characterized by struggles to make ends meet. The meme creator highlights a group of politicians who live in a secluded residential area in the largest city in the country. The meme creator compares the common voter to an ant to remind them of how vulnerable they are. Ants are small creatures that work tirelessly to get food and ensure that their families survive. The author uses such a small animal to remind electorates of the work they engage in to feed their families because unlike the politicians who have resources, they have to go toil hard to provide for their families.

The meme could be interpreted as a warning to Kenyans to maintain peace during election period. This is because elections in Kenya have been characterized by violence fueled by ethnic differences. During such periods like in 1992, 1997, 2002 and 2007, lives are lost and people are usually displaced particularly in their rural settings. On the contrary, while the electorates engage in tribal wars, the politicians live peacefully in the city, regardless of the election outcome. Furthermore the political groups presented in the meme are purely made up of men and this gives the impression that Kenyan politics is mainly dominated by men.

In a similar note, Meme 58 discloses the same kind of information about the perception of the political class in Kenya. The meme is given as follows: *Kenyan on realizing how much the Hustler cabinet nominees are worth.* The text is accompanied by a picture of a young man who holds his head with both hands, openly staring at

what could be the nominees. Following the 2022 presidential elections in Kenya, some of the people who held positions in the former regime were re-appointed to the Cabinet by the President elect who had been expected to consider common and less known people. The hustler slogan was used by the elected president, to rise to power by associating himself with the low class, popularly known as 'hustlers' in Kenya. The voters were convinced to sympathize with the then presidential aspirant because he was believed to have come from a poor background as opposed to his competitor who was associated with opulence. The 2022 elections in Kenya were therefore considered a race between the rich (dynasties) and the poor (hustlers), (Karanja, 2022). However, following the vetting of the cabinet nominees, Kenyans are seen to have been hit hard by the truth of their net worth. The picture of the man in the meme, represent Kenyans. He stares at the supposed nominees with his mouth agape, his eyes bulge out and he holds his head with both hands to express the shock and surprise upon realizing the financial worth of the Cabinet Secretaries. This discloses the realization that even though they referred to themselves as hustlers, they are worth billions of shillings. The facial expression of the observer gives a feeling that they were shortchanged to believe that the cabinet was made up of individuals thought to be economically down.

Studies have shown that politicians in Kenya are portrayed in a stereotypical and negative manner. Ndonye et al., (2015) explain that the politicians in the country infect the citizens with certain perceptions in their attempt to down their competitors. Through the memes, the social media community in Kenya decries what is believed to be the absence of transparency and accountability in the political space. Kiai (2010) argues that corrupt individuals use opportunities and public offices to loot without any

fear of being held accountable. This vice is unearthed by the meme authors. Meme 46 which contains *pictures of Kenyan politicians opening a 10 Million* bridge as earlier discussed in chapter two of this study gives the opinion that there is lack of transparency and integrity in the expenditure of public money. The bridge presented in the meme is seen to be too narrow and can barely hold the weight of the few politicians. The meme gives a perception that the funds were embezzled or diverted to some other personal projects. This information disclosed by the meme author is supported by the suggestions relayed by Ngwira (2022) that memes point a finger at the politicians who take advantage of their positions and available opportunities to enrich themselves. While supporting the message posted in the meme, Ali and Sheikh (2018) call for accountability and responsibility of government officials in the management of public resources if economic growth is to be realized through tax revenue.

Furthermore, Meme 1 paints a leadership perceived to be exploitative in nature. The meme pictures a skeleton of a horse. All the flesh has been removed by the government and it still comes for the traces of bones left. The message given by the speaker that represents the government insists that the horse should hold on so that the remaining bones can be further extracted. The government then heaps the bones into a huge bag of taxes. The image of a civilian that can barely stand as he carries the heavy government placed on his back represents the Kenyan citizen believed to have been weakened by the heavy burden of tax imposed on him. The flag tied around the civilian carrying the government generates a perception that he must pay taxes to show his allegiance to the Kenyan government. The meme gives the implication that the government is seen to be ‘eating’ its own children with no regards for their

apparent condition. The leaders as portrayed by the meme are therefore brought out as unfeeling and they are perceived to have no trace of sympathy within their veins. The author conforms to Shashank's (2023) perspective that memes communicate contemporary realities in a given society.

3.7 The Religious as Depicted in Memes

Wangila (2023) posits that Kenyans are religious in nature. Religion has a great significance in the Kenyan political, economic and cultural arena. This is because religion is believed to contribute to the stability of political organizations and functions. In addition, it is a factor behind the economic and cultural activities in the Kenyan context. For instance even the national anthem in Kenya is a prayer to God, the creator. All important functions in Kenya particularly those presided over by the president are begun with prayers from different representative denominations.

Even though a majority of Kenyans as portrayed in memes value their religion, they on the contrary perceive religious leaders as hypocritical. In their study on moral hypocrisy, Matthews and Mozzocco (2017) disclose that christians were rated as more hypocritical than non-Christians. Meme 26 unveils the author's assertion. The meme reads: *"waah, kumbe ata mimi sina nyota*," which translates to the speaker in the meme declaring that he is not lucky. The pictorials contain a man wearing white attire which signifies purity. It also shows that he is a man of God. He is seated inside a room guarded by police officers in uniform. He holds his chin with one of his hands, an implication that he is in a disturbed mood. He is in deep thoughts as shown by his posture. His other hand holds onto a Bible, which is his source of inspiration and solace in the place where he finds himself which in this case is the police cell.

Contextually, the man in the meme can be identified as Ezekiel Odera, a popular televangelist in Kenya. As discussed earlier in this study, he is well- known for teaching his congregation about "having a star"- a term associated with success. During his services, he teaches about the importance of having a star. He also posited that those who did not have their stars face challenges in life. He, as a result, usually prays for the congregation to recover their stolen stars. Ironically, when he found himself on the wrong side of the law, Kenyans shared memes revealing that he also did not have a star. The meme is seen to bring out a contradictory interpretation of the act of this leader praying for people to get their stars when he himself did not have one. The revelation disclosed by the meme concurs with the assertions made by Jensen et al., (2016) that religious leaders in question are prejudiced by the society since people have a perception that they pretend to be what they are not.

Furthermore, it has been noted that televangelists utilize the television to generate income from the audience (Coussiness, 2017). The author also argues that such preachers do not practice what they teach and therefore their sermons lack sacred attitudes. Meme 30 reveals the same negative attitude that most Kenyans have towards religious leadership in the country. The meme is given as follows: *You have never noticed pastors on television will pray and everyone faints except the cameraman*. Below the words, there is a picture of a puppy staring at supposed online audience with one eye as the other one is closed suggestively to alert them. The facial expression portrayed by the dog discloses that whatever is happening on the TV is perceived to be a lie. The accompanying emoji is a smiling face while the other one holds onto the chin in surprise. The tone carried by the words in the meme sounds sarcastic. The interpretation of the meme gives the opinion that, the preacher referred

to is either using magic on the other members and leaves out the cameraman or that the members are made to fall down intentionally. This further gives the implication that the issue of the congregation falling down is believed to be a manipulation by the preacher. The meme author further gives a perception that if it were the power of God, even the cameraman would find himself lying down. While examining televangelism, Kubui (2018) explains that televangelists perform stage-managed miracles to market their ministries in order to attract many people to their ministries which in turn lead to an increase in their membership. The meme is seen as form of an attack on what is believed to be the hypocritical nature of the religious leaders in Kenya. They perform fake miracles so as to attract a large number of both physical and online followers for monetary gains. These sentiments are similarly echoed by Josen et.al, (2016) who avers that religious leaders are stereotyped as lustful for power and money. The scholars further explain that such a leadership is believed to be interested in manipulating their followers.

In the same vein, Meme 29 exposes how Kenyans generally perceive Christians as pretentious in that, they feel that they have failed to be role models in the community. The meme reads: *Last Sunday a lodging receptionist wanted to confess in church, the whole congregation refused*. The words are elaborated by pictures of many people attempting to bar someone who could be the receptionist from moving towards the pulpit. The implication we get from the meme is that Kenyans feel there is a lot of unfaithfulness in the churches today. The meme also gives the opinion that some of those who go to church also engage in sexual immorality. This is could be part of the reasons as to why the lodging receptionist is prevented from making a confession. This further gives a suggestion that the culprits feared that they will be exposed. The

meme is testimony to the ideas raised by Simpon and Rios (2016) that Christianity is associated with moral virtuousness and therefore a true religious person is expected to behave according to the essence of religion.

In conclusion, the online community utilizes memes as an attempt to correct the vices that have destroyed the contemporary churches for a better society tomorrow. By using memes, Kenyans can playfully launch an attack on a certain vice with just a photo and a few words hence getting a wider readership since the audience can easily go through the meme within a very short time. The purpose of such memes as Munuku (2022) argues, is to educate the society and in this context, on the importance of being morally upright. Therefore, like other forms of both oral and written literature, memes also contain moral lessons.

3.8 Medics as Presented in Memes

There is a general perception that medical professionals particularly doctors have illegible handwritings (Brits et al., 2017). Therefore, it is believed that doctors understand what they write but other parties find it hard to comprehend what is communicated. This information is equally manifested through the memes shared by Kenyans. For instance, Meme 42: *Please kwa wale wanasomea Nursing, Pharmacy and Medicine, n level gan wanafika wanaanza kuwafunza mwandiko mbaya,* is a form of protest against such illegible writings. Translated, the speaker is inquiring about the level at which those who take nursing, pharmacy and medicine, are taught to write in 'bad' handwriting. The text is accompanied by the picture of a man who looks surprised as revealed by his facial expression. This meme reveals that it is thought that before joining the named professions, most students write legibly however, upon becoming nurses, pharmacist and doctors, they engage in illegible writing. The meme

is seen as a form of complaint suggesting that whatever the medics write should be clear enough to be understood by the consumers. However, some scholars such as Berwick and Winickoff (1996) argue that illegibility in the named profession has less to do with bad hand writing among the medics than with hand writing in general as a form of communication. The authors however associate lower legibility to executive positions and male gender. The meme reveals some truth about the perception of the medics in Kenya. Their writings are perceived as illegible and can only be understood by their own in-group members. Even though the issue of illegibility could cut across other professions, the meme author calls for clear writings from the medical field because it is felt that any misinterpretation of the prescriptions may have fatal consequences on human life.

3.9 Casting the Police in Memes

Memes attribute specific negative traits to the police officers in general. While examining the police force, Hope (2018) opines that it is an institution where integrity standards and ethics are compromised. The author further argues that police corruption is a serious problem globally and the traffic police in Kenya are the best acquainted as far as this vice is concerned. The traffic police are associated with bribery and corruption as uncovered by the author of Meme 5: The meme contains a picture of a police officer taking 'something' from a driver of a vehicle. The following words are attached to it: *Only an African can understand what's going on.* The officer presented in the meme does not bother to look at the number of passengers inside the vehicle. The passengers stare at the police officer but he avoids their eye contact as he receives what is understood as bribe from the driver as shown in the meme. The meme reveals that the traffic police on the Kenyan roads are

perceived as people who lack integrity. They openly take bribes and engage in other unlawful practices. The taking of bribes prevents them from effectively performing their duties for instance they fail to check overloading and roadworthiness of a vehicle. The result of such action by the police as seen in the meme creates upon the Kenyan public a perception that upon giving out bribes, the drivers are at liberty to break the traffic rules as they wish.

Furthermore, memes also show that the police are thought of as brutal and murderous. According to Trinkner et al., (2019), the police are associated with a threat, linked to the overreliance on force and coercion to control any situation. Trinkner and Goff (2016) further explain that the threat internalized by the police officers affect their identity and self-worth. Such a stereotype threat as argued by Steel et al., (2002) raises the chances of one engaging in stereotype conforming behaviour. Officers who experience stereotype threat predict resistance and hence resort to the use of force rather than moral authority since they believe that the citizens will always disobey authority (Goff et al., 2013). Meme 7: *BREAKING NEWS!!! In the fight against this pandemic, corona virus has killed 1 Kenyan and the police have killed 3*, paints such a picture of the police force in Kenya. As the meme discloses, they are perceived as brutal because they use excessive force unnecessarily against the civilians. The meme creator has drawn comparison between the deaths caused by the corona virus versus the ones caused by the police and allows the audience to make their own judgments. The use of numbers in the meme enables the online audience to clearly visualize the magnitude of deaths suspected to have occurred in the hands of the officers. The meme further examined implies that the officers are seen to be worse than the virus

itself. Ironically, a large number of Kenyans were killed as the police imposed the measures to curb the spread of the corona virus.

Largely, memes present a tainted image of the uniformed forces in Kenya from the perspective of the public. The memes therefore confirm the assertion made by Trinkner et al., (2019) that the negative stereotypes associated with the police have eroded the public trust. It is however clear from the discussion that stereotypes affect the behaviour of the police (Smith & Alpert, 2007). This reflection contains some element of truth about the police officers who are perceived to be associated with bribery in Kenya. This is because Kenyans behave the way they do towards the police because they have internalized the perception that the police is a threat to them. On the other hand, the police for instance feel that they are perceived as corrupt, regardless of whether they take bribes or not as Dasgupta (2000) suggests, the perceivers should be aware of their biases for this problem to be resolved. It therefore takes the efforts of both the police and the civilians to eliminate the inherent clichés to end these vices for a better nation. It is also understood that the police play a notable role in maintaining law and order. Alamban et al., (2022) opine that the police force is recognized for their commitment to control criminal gangs in the society.

3.10 Kenyan Students as Portrayed in Memes

Some scholars argue that given an opportunity, students would rather cheat than fail in an examination. Pramadi et al., (2017) posit that such behaviour is usually seen during tests, quizzes or tasks. The authors further argue that cheating in exam has become a cliché and this is done through copying and collusion due to the pressure to achieve higher scores. Meme creators have exposed such vices on social media

platforms in Kenya. The memes associate some of the students with lower performance due to inadequate preparedness which in turn drives them to cheat in exams. Other scholars like Carr-Hill et al., (2018), however attribute cheating and poor performance to the exam system which encourages rote learning as opposed to critical thinking. Meme 47*: UKIFIKA DARO SIKU YA MAIN EXAM HALAFU UPATE BACKBENCH ISHAJAA NA MACAT UKO NA 2/30,* gives the perception that some Kenyan students do not read for exams. The translation is that the text describes the behaviour of a student who failed the continuous assessment test but comes late for the final exam only to find the backbench full. The written text elaborates a picture of a boy who is unable to stand on his own as the legs seem too weak to hold his heavy body and two other students are trying to help him stand up.

The meme gives a perception that some students in Kenya do not take their academic work seriously an implication we get from the low marks scored in the continuous assessment test. The body size of the boy in the meme has been used by the author to satirize some of the Kenyan students who are seen to prefer eating to reading. To add insult to injury, the student finds the backbench full which shows that he will be unable to cheat in the exam by copying from the others at the back. This is because the backbench which would have protected him from the prying eyes of the examiner is already full hence sitting in front would expose his malpractice which may lead to him being caught in the act. The information relayed in the meme corresponds to the sentiments highlighted by Muthee and Wamae (2021) that exam malpractice has increased in Kenya because some of the students are generally lazy and therefore ill-prepared for exams and this result in them engaging in cheating in order to pass.

Figure 3.6: (a) Meme 47

Figure 3.6: (b) Meme 51

Similarly, Meme 51 reveals the perceived attitude that Kenyan students have towards Mathematics as a subject. The meme reads: *Lesson ya P.E ikifika alafu teacher wa Maths aingie* which translates to what happens when a teacher goes in for Mathematics when it is supposed to be a P.E lesson. A picture similar to the previous one in Meme 47 has been used thus making it a cliché. We have a picture of three students. One of them seems to have fallen down while the other two, a boy and a girl are trying to lift him up. By falling down upon realizing that they were going to have a Mathematics lesson instead of P.E, the student shows the dislike for Mathematics. He therefore feigns illness so as to escape the Mathematics lesson. From this meme, we can draw a conclusion that majority of the students in Kenya are seen to prefer P.E to Mathematics lessons. This discovery is supported by Philips and Silverman (2015) who declare that students' attitude towards Physical Education was seen to be favourable.

In summary, the memes create a perception that some of the Kenyan students inadequately prepare for exams and this is believed to be one of the factors contributing to their unsatisfactory performance. The memes also disclose that some

of the students are painted as having a tendency of cheating in exams. This therefore calls for proper invigilation by the concerned institutions. Ojwang (2022) also suggests that cheating in exams happens through collusion and this can be reduced by installation of CCTV cameras in the classrooms. Baijnath and Singh (2019) in their study agree with the issues raised in the meme by positing that cheating in exams is a global scourge and should be curbed. Moreover, just as exposed by the memes, some of the students in Kenya are presumed to have a negative attitude towards Mathematics and tend to prefer Physical Education in school. As such, teachers may have to find ways of motivating learners so that they can develop a liking for Mathematics. Perhaps, teachers should come up with ways of performing Mathematics outside the classroom to arouse learners' interest on the subject.

3.11 Conclusion

In conclusion, the memes shared by Kenyans reveal the existence of both positive and negative stereotypes. Positive stereotypes lead to an improvement in performance (Walton & Cohen, 2003). However, most of the stereotypes are aligned towards the negative perception which in turn may lead to intentional discrimination.

CHAPTER FOUR

MEMES AND THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIOCULTURAL ISSUES IN KENYA

4.1 Overview

This chapter sets out to look into how the memes shared by Kenyans on the social media mirror the state of the country politically, economically and even socio-culturally. From the political perspective, memes highlight issues such as elections, Kenyan leadership, corruption and neocolonialism. The economic factors addressed in this section include inflation, food security, economic stratification, unemployment and the effect of natural disasters on the economy. From a sociocultural viewpoint, memes in this chapter address issues like the place of religion, cultural diversity and social problems affecting Kenyans. The section also discusses the reactions of the citizens to the existing conditions affecting them in one way or another.

4.2 Introduction

According to Achebe (2010) post-colonial African countries still grapple with a number of challenges ranging from political instability, social and economic problems particularly brought about by traitorous African leadership and neocolonialism. As such, the author argues that the electorate is usually dissatisfied, disoriented and disillusioned. According to Nyadera et al., (2020), Kenya is no exception because like other post-independent African states, it is also characterized by unfulfilled political and economic expectations. Amasava (2023) also opines that post-independent Kenya is characterized by power struggles. As a result, the Kenyan citizens have resorted to using social media platforms to air their grievances to the government. Technology

has therefore become a pillar of national unity among Kenyans who are consumers of the social media

4.3 How Memes Mirror the Political Situation in the Country

4.3.1 Introduction

Internet memes have become agents of political interactions as they comment on the current realities in a given society (Akhther, 2017). They also play a pivotal role in communication in the social media and political narratives. Kenyans specifically share a lot of information through memes on Facebook and WhatsApp because the sites give them the opportunity to upload relevant photos or pictures on public issues and in return be able to observe the reactions from the online audience. The habitual and communal circulation of the internet memes makes them influential as the majority of the internet community is able to identify with them as performances of internet culture. This results in the wide spread of information shared through memes because a number of Kenyans access the sites, a factor attributed to the availability and access to electronic gadgets such as smartphones.

4.3.2 Memes, Elections and Uncertainties

To start off, the sampled memes from Facebook and WhatsApp unmask a country characterized by what is believed as unstable governance. Since independence, the Kenyan government has been struggling to achieve both political and economic stability. Even though prior studies reveal that there has been a gradual shift in terms of leadership from the authoritarian to more democratic forms, Kenyan politics is still characterized by ethnicity which has given birth to a fragile state (Shiloho, 2018). Ethnicity has been politicized since the country attained internal governance and

leadership has been rotational between two major tribes namely: Kikuyu and Kalenjin (Ajulu, 2002). As a result, the ethnic loyalties are manipulated mainly for political gains (Wolff, 2006). In the 2017 elections in Kenya, the then opposition leader, Raila Amollo Odinga, referred to himself as the Kenya's Joshua who would set the citizens free and lead them to the Promised Land, Canaan (Wabende, 2021). Joshua was chosen to lead the Israelites in the bible to Canaan following the death of Moses.

As Mukhongo (2020) asserts, the social media platform in Kenya has created a forum for political conversations which give netizens an opportunity to question government narratives that they find impossible to accommodate. Citizens also have an avenue on the social media to participate in online protests through humour. For instance, during the 2022 General Elections in Kenya, there was a delay in the announcement of the presidential elections.

As Kenyans impatiently waited for the results, they shared memes to enable them cope with the rising political temperatures with each group posting memes that supported their side of the political stance. Some Kenyans posted memes containing an image of the IEBC chair called Wafula Chabukati, positing that they should swear him instead, as the fifth president of the Republic of Kenya. Others humorously compared that critical moment when Kenyans were eagerly waiting for the announcement of the presidential results to labour pains. They posted memes like: Meme 19 "*Kenya mzima saa hii imekuwa maternity ward*. Chebukati *anakuja anapima centimeters anasema bado, tembea tembea kidogo*".This translated means that the entire Kenyan nation is in the maternity ward and Chabukati (the election chair) monitors the delivery progress but realizes that it is not yet time for the baby to

be born and he encourages the mother to keep walking around to ease the delivery process. This shows that Kenyans resorted to humour to ease the political tension caused by the delay in the release of the election results. This is because the electorates believed that the suspense was too loud. Election was compared to labour pains because it is understood that most Kenyans never slept with some claiming that they could only keep their eyes off the TV to answer to a necessary call of nature. The meme author gives a feeling Kenyans had to remain vigilant so that they do not lose the metaphorical 'baby' (new government). By drawing a parallel between elections in Kenya and labour pains, the meme author reveals that the election process was thought of as a matter of life and death and it was believed that whoever lost the 'baby' had to wait for another five year period. The sentiments shared in the meme concur with Wasike's (2020) ideas that meme act as coping mechanisms during difficult times.

4.3.3 Bribery and Corruption through the Lens of Memes

The memes circulated by the online community in Kenya exposes a country believed to be marred with bribery and corruption. According to Hope (2014), the police force tops the list as far as corruption is concerned in Kenya and this, as the author argues, reflects a failing government system. Meme 5 *which reads: Only an African can understand what's going on,* exposes corruption which is considered to be deep rooted within the police force in Kenya. The meme contains a picture of a police officer in orange uniform holding the left hand of a driver as the passengers at the backseat observe silently. In that connection, some scholars blame the officers as opposed to the drivers.

Research has shown that the people are forced to part with money to avoid arrests for alleged offences or gain particular favours (Kihl, 2017). This behaviour painted in the meme is in agreement with the opinion expressed by Wrong (2009) that everyone is corrupt in Kenya, given a chance. The message relayed by the meme creator opines that corruption begins with all of us, particularly the Kenyan citizens. This message further supposes that if all Kenyans represented by the passengers on the vehicle could take a personal responsibility by speaking loudly against the vice, it is believed that it could come to an eventual termination. To sum up, Githinji (2017) warns that if left untamed, police corruption becomes a threat to security in the country which may lead to increase in crime, terrorism, police brutality and abuse of human rights.

4.3.4 Power and Abuse of Human Rights Through the Lens of Memes

According to Bowling et al., (2001), abuse of power, intolerance and failure to observe human rights characterize the police institution globally. The author further posits that such use of abusive force is discriminatory and includes the intrusive and coercive powers such as 'stop and search.' This culture is also inherent in Kenya and it is well portrayed through the internet memes.

Kenyans use Facebook and WhatsApp platforms to highlight human rights abuse particularly meted out by the security forces. Meme 7 reveals how the police use excessive force against the innocent Kenyans. It reads as follows: *BREAKING NEWS!!!In the fight against this pandemic, corona virus has killed 1 Kenyan and the police have killed 3*. The capitalized words in the meme "BREAKING NEWS" are written in red colour to symbolize the magnitude of the danger that Kenyans associate the police with. Below the written word is a picture of a worried man starring in

surprise, his mouth agape. The man is looking at the breaking news in wonder. The meme shows that it is believed that the police have killed a large number of people compared to the deadly corona virus disease. This further implies that the police are thought of as traitorous as they are associated with violation of the rights of Kenyans. According to the meme, it is wrong for the police officers who are expected to protect Kenyans to kill them.

Supporting the ideas expressed in the meme, Sipalla (2012) observes that police are associated with arbitrary arrests, torture, corruption and extra-judicial killings which are committed at will. The meme paints a perception that it is better to tame the police officers presumed to have gone rogue than the virus itself. The interpretation we can infer from the meme is that much as the country is trying to curb the spread of a new viral disease, it is felt that there is a more dangerous disease within which is consuming more lives of Kenyans than COVID-19.

4.3.5 Does Neocolonialism Exist in Kenya-Africa? Memes Answer Back

Kenyans on the social media platforms posit that neocolonialism is what characterizes the contemporary nation. According to Babatola (2014) neocolonialism enhances a continuous exploitation of Africa by the West. The author also opines that the donors tame the economy of the former colonies through bilateral agreements and treaties which channel all the profits back to Europe leaving Africa in a sorry state several decades after independence. As such, African countries are controlled by the western superpowers in such a way that they cannot stand on their own as sovereign states as captured in memes.

Meme 3 depicts a political leadership presumed to have a tendency of borrowing from the developed countries. It is presented as follows: *Uhuru seeing Magufuli cancel $ 10 Billion loan from China.*The meme author speculates that the country represented is characterized by the dependency syndrome. As explained earlier in Chapter two, the meme pictures the former Kenyan president unblinkingly staring at Magufuli, the former Tanzanian counterpart, cancelling a loan. The stare in the meme gives a view that he is interested in the loan. This meme discloses the feeling that Kenyans are aware of the government's huge appetite for foreign loans despite the fact that it exposes the country to foreign domination.

Figure 4.1: Meme 3

Carnahan (2015) suggests that the developing countries should have effective governance and reduce overreliance on foreign aids. While equally disagreeing with external borrowing, Rahaman (2017) supports the message relayed by the meme by positing that political independence without economic freedom is vanity because neocolonialism has exposed Africa to a vicious cycle of poverty, famine and corruption. Mamndani (2001) attributes neocolonialism to the failure of the African leadership to decolonize political identities.

4.3.6 Conclusion

Generally, the meme creators have utilized memes on the Kenyan social media platforms to pinpoint the perceived political status of the nation. The memes are considered to mirror the existing power struggle between various political factions in the country. Such struggles as brought out by the memes are believed to be a threat to unity particularly during election periods. Moreover, memes disclose a country marred by corruption which is exercised in various sectors.

Additionally, memes expose the weak leadership in the country suspected to be exposing the nation to huge foreign debts. Like any other literary text, memes give a picture of events and activities taking place in a given society. As such, the anonymous authors of memes anticipate a change in the political order in Kenya so that the leadership can mentor the upcoming generations by demonstrating political tolerance. Moreover, the authors call for respect of human rights in the Kenyan society. The memes are media of communication reminding all Kenyans to unite and exercise accountability and transparency in their actions.

4.4 How Memes Reflect the State of Kenya's Economy

4.4.1 Introduction

The state of Kenya's economy is clearly captured through the creative use of memes by the online community. This section will deal with how memes have been used to mirror what Kenyans view as the economic achievements and challenges facing the country.

4.4.2 Inflation in Kenya: The Memes Speak out

What Kenyans consider as hard economic times is depicted by the memes shared by the social media community. Meme 12 presented as; *KENYANS GROAN UNDER HIGH COST OF LIVING* shows the economic condition of the citizens. The text is further elaborated by a picture of a bent man carrying a heavy loaded plastic basket of household goods placed on his back. He bends under the weight of the heavy load. By making the victim to groan, the meme author communicates to the audience the feeling that the man is in extreme pain. In so doing, the author is seen to disapprove the high cost of the basic commodities.

The interpretation of the meme creates a perception that the country is going through a period of inflation which has resulted in the high cost of living. The information put across by the meme is in agreement with the arguments raised by Amaglobeli et al., (2019) that households suffer as a result of reduced financial ability due to public debt which negatively affects the economic growth. The same information is relayed in Meme 17 which reads: *Wachanilale kabla bei ya usingizi ipande, hii Kenya you never know what's next* which translates to "let me sleep before the cost of sleeping rises as nobody knows what happens next in Kenya". The message is elaborated by the emojis suggesting that the meme is viewed as a sarcastic attack on the government. The meme repeatedly exposes a feeling that Kenyans are grappling with high cost living. The speaker in Meme 17 alludes to the idea that the government of Kenya is unpredictably increasing taxes and the meme creator playfully foresees a situation whereby even the cost of sleeping could rise.

On the same note, the scarcity of food in the Kenyan households is also brought forth through the use of memes. Meme 14 which reads: *lorry ya sukuma imeanguka but hakuna mtu anaiba, unaiba ukakule na ugali gani?* The English translation is that a lorry transporting kales has overturned but surprisingly nobody steals the vegetables as they cannot be eaten without *ugali* (a staple food in Kenya prepared from maize flour). The meme depicts a lorry ferrying vegetables which has overturned and sacks of vegetables are lying all over. The meme presumes that under normal circumstances, people would steal kales from the fallen lorry. Kales are popular green vegetables which are usually served with *ugali*, a staple food for a majority of Kenyans. This meme is used to foreground the perennial problem of food insecurity in Kenya.

Figure 4.2: Meme 14

4.4.3 Memes and Economic Stratification in Kenya

It is also interesting to note that a close examination of memes shared by the online community in Kenya depicts a society that is economically stratified. The memes reveal class disparity between various categories of Kenyans determined by their nature of socio-economic status. Meme 10 which reads: *NOBODY is going back to BONDO or SUGOI, wanarudi KAREN, wewe ndio utarudi kupambana na rent ukitembea on foot kama siafu*, the translation of the part in Swahili is that they are

going back to Karen, but the common people will go back on foot and keep on struggling to pay rent. This meme portrays a society characterized by inequality. Bondo refers to the rural home of the then opposition leader, Raila Odinga, while Sugoi refers to that of the then presidential aspirant, William Ruto. Though the meme reveals that none of the political leaders will go back to their villages whether they succeed or fail in their elective posts, it gives a presumption that they are different from the civilians. Karen refers to a secluded urban place in the capital city occupied by the politicians in Kenya. The political class lives in expensive mansions away from the masses. Furthermore the meme paints a picture of the struggle that the common citizen goes through in order to make ends meet. For instance, they trek for long distances and face difficulties paying rent. Ikiara et al., (2006) confirm that there exists a vicious cycle of inequality, a factor attributed to the political economy in Kenya.

4.4.4 Memes, Unemployment and Other Economic Hurdles

Existing studies by Ayhan (2016) indicates that the rising cases of youth unemployment globally creates a disillusioned generation which negatively impacts on the current and future economies. Kenyans on social media space presume that such alarming rates of unemployment are also witnessed in the country. Meme 40 reveals expectations that most Kenyans would wish to accomplish at a certain age in their lives. It is presented as follows:

Me: (By 28, I will have a nice job, house, a car, wife and kids).

Figure 4.3: Meme 40

However, by 28 years, the speaker shown in the meme has nothing to show but ironically, he finds himself observing cocks fighting. He even attempts to separate them. The meme shows that at the indicated age, the speaker is jobless and his expectations have not been met. Against his expectations, the speaker at 28 years of age neither has a family nor a car as earlier anticipated. The man considered to be a representative of the Kenyan youth is used to bring out the rise of unemployment. Most youths upon completion of their courses are unable to find jobs and as a result, they live in abject poverty. They also undergo emotional challenges such as depression because of their failure to meet their personal needs and to make ends meet. The meme signals the government to keep the youth engaged by providing job opportunities.

Similarly, Meme 13 reveals what is seen as the financial status of a majority of Kenyans. The meme states: *Umewahi sota mpaka unatamani ID number yako ingekuwa ni pesa yako imetulia tu kwa bank*. This translated is a question asking whether the addressee has ever been broke until he/she wishes that the ID number could be the total amount of money kept in his/her bank account. The text is

elaborated by a picture of a cartoon that stares at a distant unseen object which gives the reader a feeling that it is thinking deeply.

The image of the cartoon represents Kenyans who are believed to be broke or unemployed and what remains for them is to keep wishing. The interpretation of this meme can mean that the individual being referred to in the meme is considered to be above eighteen years as indicated by the reference to the ID number. This further insinuates that majority of Kenyans aged above eighteen years struggle to make ends meet. The meme also discloses that Kenyans feel that getting the ID card is seen to be useless because it neither takes them anywhere nor does it guarantee one an assurance of getting a job. In Kenyan context, the ID number is believed to be a necessary document for everyone above 18 years of age. It is a requirement that enables Kenyans to get admissions to colleges, travel permits and employment. The body language of the cartoon in the meme symbolically reveal that most Kenyans are perceived to be disillusioned and hopeless, a situation occasioned by their inability to meet their basic necessities.

Memes also depict a country economically affected by natural calamities (floods). However, the meme authors opine that such disasters have overpowered the Kenyan government and the victims are shown as having given up. This is illustrated by the Meme 24. The meme reads: *Mwalimu wa maths: Let's study some calculus before we die. Just one more example.* The meme translated means that the teacher of Mathematics is pleading with the students that they do one more example in calculus just before they die. The written text in the meme is supported by pictures of a teacher doing some calculations on the board while the students are following the illustrations

in a submerged class. The water level in the classroom has reached the waist of the standing teacher and ironically, the students are presented as attentive while the water can be seen to be covering their chests. The meme reveals that the country is disaster unprepared. This is because the students and their teacher could have been airlifted to safer grounds. The author feels that the government is not swift enough to assist Kenyans who were affected by the ravaging floods. It takes long to act thereby causing deaths of innocent people.

The meme presents a class that has resigned to its fate as it is determined to do a final example before it is swept away by the floods. The author of the meme opines that floods have affected the economy of the country by destroying the infrastructure and contributing to the loss of manpower. The author therefore suggests that the government should put more effort in disaster management to salvage Kenyans from such calamities. Glago (2021) concurs with the ideas raised in the meme by positing that floods destroy lives, properties as well as the entire environment. The author however insists that even though it is a natural disaster, the action and effects of floods are magnified by human activities. The author further suggests that governments should develop technologically advanced disaster awareness, response and management programmes to enhance efficient control of such calamities.

4.4.5 Conclusion

From the foregoing, memes reveal that the country is affected by economic challenges such as inflation which raises the cost of living. This condition is made worse by high rate of unemployment. Moreover, memes disclose that Kenya is economically stratified and there exists a wide gap between the rich and the poor. Such a glaring

inequality can be reduced through equitable allocation and distribution of resources and creation of employment opportunities to Kenyans. The meme authors also call for prompt management of disasters to salvage the country from economic losses attached to them.

4.5 Sociocultural Issues Portrayed by Memes in Kenya

4.5.1 Introduction

This section deals with how memes picture the sociocultural phenomena such religion, marriage, the family, disease, education and other factors. The use of memes has given Kenyans an opportunity to point out the social problems affecting them not only individually but also at communal level.

4.5.2 Memes and Religion

According to Jensen et al., (2016) religion is a cultural subsystem that entails a detailed interpretation of human existence, which gives order and meaning to the world, life and death. The authors also posit that religion therefore exists through the history of a society and cultural context. The place and role of religion in Kenya has been brought to the fore through the memes captured on the Facebook pages and WhatsApp statuses. Kenyans celebrate religious diversity and the freedom of worship and the study of memes show how religion is interlaced in every activity Kenyans engage in ranging from political, economic and sociocultural. It is however worth noting that the dominant religion is Christianity (Wangila, 2023) and the circulated memes confirm this assertion.

To begin with, the internet memes foreground a close connection between religion and politics in Kenya. Voll (1982) argues that religion and politics are inseparable in Kenya in that even parliamentary sessions begin with prayers from different religious groups represented. Meme 6 shows this relationship. It reads: *Enyewe only Joshua and Caleb reached Canaan*. The translation of the meme means that it is a reality that only Joshua and Caleb reached Canaan. The words are elaborated by pictures of two political leaders namely Moses Wetangula (representing the biblical Joshua) and Musalia Mudavadi (representing the biblical Caleb) seated closer in a relaxed posture in a place perceived to be Canaan. An examination on the use of memes containing religious content gives a perception that the political class advertently alludes to the Bible to be able to convince the masses to vote for them. Joshua and Caleb are the two survivors of the Israelites in the Bible who led the people into Canaan after the death of Moses. Moses was called by God to lead the Israelites from Egypt and lead them to Canaan, the Promised Land. However, after his death, Joshua and Caleb took over his mantle.

In Kenyan context, the two personalities in the meme were initially members of different parties. However, just before the general elections in 2022, they joined a party that won the elections and this symbolizes that they were able to cross over to the land of promise, Canaan. The duo as a result, ended up in senior positions in the government, the Canaan alluded to by Kenyans online. The message in the meme concurs with the sentiments put across by Ndereba (2021) that religion and politics are interdependent because each is a necessity of the other. As such, the meme reveals that the political success is believed to be attributed to religious connection.

Secondly, Meme 16 gives a general impression that Kenyans are religious in nature, an argument supported by Wangila (2023). The meme is presented as follows: *Kenyans when told inflation is going up and not down*. To complement the words is a picture of a woman adorned in purely white clothes, holding a Bible to show that she is seeking divine intervention. The white clothes worn by the woman in the meme is a symbol of purity. The bible she holds on her hand signifies that she believes in God. Her bent position as she holds the bible can be interpreted to mean that she is making a prayer to a divine power to intervene in the land of Kenya which is represented by the green grass. ThSe meme shows that Kenyans are perceived to be a religious people. Earlier scholars explain that religion and science share a common purpose of explaining complex natural phenomena (Simpson, 2019). Therefore the experiences beyond human understanding could find solutions in religion, an inner belief and faith (Jensen et. al, 2016). The meme therefore gives a general feeling that Kenyans resort to divine interventions to seek answers for some of the problems facing them. However, the meme creator is satirical and seems to question the act of seeking supernatural interventions for the mistakes intentionally created. The interpretation of the meme gives a feeling that seeking such interventions is seen as a form of escapism and therefore Kenyans are expected face the tough reality. While scholars like Okatta et al., (2017) attributes inflation to political instability, others such as Bailey and Farber (2004) agree with the meme author by positing that people resort to religion when faced with uncertainties especially those associated with reduced trust in the government.

On the same note, Kenyans share memes to show how their feelings on how religion has been used for financial gains in the country. Trihastutie (2019), equates religious

platforms to market places flocked by church leaders with an aim of soliciting funds and donations from the audience. Meme 11 which reads: *Vile siku nikiacha hanasa na dhambi zote af nichaguliwe nikuwe church elder.* The translation means that, the boy in the picture will look so (grow fat and be neat) upon denouncing his sinful nature after which he will be appointed a church elder. The words in the meme refer back to a fat boy in a suit holding a Bible. The meme implies that the boy will get financial stability as he believes that he will obtain some money from the offerings given at the church. It is also perceived that he will be able to eat well since the church elders are believed to be catered for before they leave for their homes. The message relayed by the meme shows that most Kenyans think that people go to church for positions and to attain financial stability.

Similarly, Meme 30 reveals the drama that happens in the church for financial gains. The meme is captured as follows: *You have never noticed pastor's on television pray and everyone faints except the cameraman*. The words are complimented by a picture of a puppy. The puppy in the meme suggestively stares with one eye to communicate that whatever that is happening on the Television is believed to be a lie. The notion that everybody except the camera man faints insinuates that the fainting is thought of as feigned otherwise everybody could faint were it attributed to a supernatural force. Interestingly, the camera man has to remain standing so as to record what is believed to be the 'miracles' meant to attract both the physical and online audience to the facility. The meme can also be interpreted to mean that the televangelists are thought of as people who intentionally cast miracles so as to attract more funds through tithes and offerings. Such televangelists are usually believed to be associated with large

gatherings which gives a perception that Kenyans appetite for miracles is directly proportional to the the preachers' creativity.

To sum up, memes associated with religion captured on the social media are seen to ridicule religious activities in the country. They give a feeling that Kenyans are disgusted by religious hypocrisy deeply embedded within various churches in Kenya today. The authors' stance is that those who go to church should portray the image of God in their actions or become sinners fully rather than remaining in-between (lukeworm). Furthermore, memes presume that Kenyans are religious people thus agreeing with earlier studies done by Mbiti (1989) who declares that it is uneasy to point out the religious from the irreligious because religion control every daily activity in Kenya.

4.5.3 How Memes Reveal the Ethnic Diversity of the Kenyan Nation

The memes shared among the online community paint Kenya as a country composed of several ethnic groups characterized by diverse cultural practices believed to be united by a common national language and heritage. The main national languages in the country are English and Kiswahili. English is mainly used in official contexts. Though belonging to different ethnic groups, Kenyans communicate with each other through the memes circulated in the two languages across the country.

As revealed in the memes discussed earlier in chapter two, Kenyans engage in diverse socio-cultural phenomena ranging from marriage, christmas celebrations and even business. Moreover, memes show how some communities like the Abaluhya

communally mourn their dead. This is presented in Meme 21: *Ukifaint 5 mins in Kakamega. Neighbour: Huskii Wycliffe ametuachako*.

The English translation means that if you faint for five minutes in Kakamega, your neighbours will immediately prepare for your funeral. Kakamega is a town found in western part of Kenya specifically occupied by the Abaluhya community. The meme pictures a man reporting that someone called Wycliffe has passed on. He is carrying two big cooking pots towards Wycliffe's home. This shows that it is believed he is ready to celebrate the dead. The man is addressing a lady who is reading a book while seated. The body language of the addressee shows that she is surprised that the man is busy preparing to cook food in the family of the deceased. The meme author satirizes the perceived desire for funerals because of the feasts involved even when someone is just unconscious. Mombo and Mojola (2023) explain that in Western Kenya and other African communities, death and bereavement is a communal affair hence the reason why many people come together to mourn.

Meme 59 reveals that the Kalenjin community which occupies the Rift Valley region engages in long distance running. The meme is presented as follows: *MOST OF THE WORLD'S FASTEST RUNNERS COME FROM A SINGLE TRIBE IN KENYA, AFRICA, CALLED THE "KALENJINS".* The words are accompanied by pictures of three African athletes holding a Kenyan flag as they run. This meme can be interpreted to mean that even though we have other runners in the country, the Kalenjin ethnic community dominates the race. It further gives a feeling that the world at large recognizes the specific community in Kenya due to their popularity in athletics.

To sum up, the memes expose the existing cultural diversities in Kenya which act as a uniting force as Kenyans attempt to borrow the positive features attributed to specific communities. The sampled communities have been used to highlight the notion that as a country, Kenya is made up of many ethnic groups enriching the country with varied talents. Such diversities unite Kenyans together as one nation, creating a sense of belonging.

4.5.5 Other Social Issues Addressed in Memes

Kenya as a nation is depicted as struggling with some social problems like drug abuse and alcohol abuse. It is also fighting such diseases as COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS. In addition, the country is also faced by natural calamities like floods among others as spelt out by the memes shared on the social media platforms.

Just like other forms of literature, memes signal the existing social challenges faced by the citizens in Kenya. Memes 48 and 50, indicate that some Kenyans are struggling with alcohol abuse.

Figure 4.4: (a) Meme 48 **Figure 4.4: (b)** Meme 50

Meme 48 states that: *ALCOHOL IS NEVER AN ANSWER BUT IT* CAN *MAKE YOU FORGET THE QUESTION*. To complement the words is a picture of a near naked man on a floater on a lake as signified by the blue colour. According to Lakhadive (2019), blue colour stands for peace and calm which as the meme implies, is seen to be short lived. He attempts to lift his head as he takes a glass of alcohol in his right hand while holding more bottles of alcohol on the left. Similarly, his bulging eyes reveal that he is intoxicated. The size of the eyes, the sluggish pupil and swollen disc in the meme disclose that alcohol has affected his sight.

Similar sentiments are shared by Karimi et al.,(2021) that alcohol consumption impairs with visibility and leads to abnormal eye movement. The entire body of the man in the picture is yellowish in colour which Parikh (2011) in his study of colours in relation to culture in India, associates with cowardice. This is a reason as to why the meme could be interpreted to mean that the act of running away from problems through consumption of alcohol could mean that he is cowardly. The picture of the inebriated man purporting to swim in a lake symbolizes how alcohol is thought to take the victim to another world. The meaning of the meme reveals that some people intentionally engage in drinking to help them forget a problem instead of finding a lasting solution.

Similarly, Meme 50*; I was reading how alcohol messes up our liver. So from today, no more reading,* shows that those who abuse alcohol are believed to be aware of the consequences of their indulgence. The utterance of the speaker shows that he no longer wants to read more about the other effects brought about by alcohol consumption in his body. This can be interpreted that those who take alcohol in

Kenya know that it affects the liver. However, the meme reveals that this cannot stop them from taking it. The written text in the meme supports the findings by Aberg et al., (2022) that the chronic consumption of alcohol causes harmful effects on the liver. Ironically, the meme shows that as a result of addiction, people who engage in alcohol abuse would rather have it slowly destroy their liver than stop drinking. The meme exposes the level of alcohol addiction in the Kenyan. Moreover, the two memes sampled display pictures of men which implying that majority of those engaging in alcohol abuse in Kenya are men. The meme thus sends a message to the Kenyan nation to put in place measures that can aid in the elimination of the vice as well as those that can help rehabilitate drunkards.

In addition, memes depict Kenya as country grappling with diseases like HIV / AIDS and COVID -19 that have depleted the resources of the victims affected. Meme 2 as presented earlier shows that COVID-19 pandemic economically affected Kenyans. The meme reveals that more than 80,000 Kenyans lost their income as a result of the disease. The meme further suggests that the country relied on financial aid from donors so as to meet the cost of medication of the individuals who were both infected and affected. Meme 35, earlier discussed in this chapter also shows that HIV/AIDS is prevalent in the country. The presence of such diseases is an indication of reduced productivity. Therefore, the government should put in place stringent measures that can help curb the diseases.

Interestingly, Meme 52 depicts how the entry of COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya exposed existing infidelity within the family set up in Kenya. The meme is presented as follows: *Hii quarantine itatuonyesha mambo. Umetulia tu kejani then you start to*

notice how your kid looks like the *landlord.* The translation is that the quarantine revealed a lot as the pictured man began noticing how his child resembled the landlord. Quarantine in this context is used to refer to a period when movement was restricted in Kenya following the outbreak of COVID-19. During this period, people who were suspected to be infected by diseases were put in isolation. As such people were forced to remain within their families to avoid getting infected. The text is complimented by a familiar picture of the former Head of State of Kenya who looks worried and shocked at the turn of events in the family. As Rokach and Chan (2023) in their study on marital infidelity explain, the response to such behaviour by a partner includes shock and despair, a reaction clearly captured through the speaker in the meme.

An image of the then president who is the father of the nation in the meme symbolizes Kenyan fathers. A deeper scrutiny of the meme reveals prevailing unfaithfulness in Kenyan families. By opining that the child resembles the landlord, the author insinuates that there is a sexual relationship between the landlord and the speaker's wife which has resulted in the birth of a child. Supporting the message relayed in the meme, Imtinan et al., (2023) observes that infidelity has become common in the contemporary society and this, the authors concludes, culminates to indifferences in families.

Figure 4.5: (a) Meme 52

Figure 4.5: (b) Meme 60

Generally, memes foreground the notion that Kenyans go through a lot of challenges from the leadership to the citizens. Meme 60 summarizes a clear reflection of the experiences of the Kenyan citizens. *The meme reads as follows. These days you are either going through a lot, coming from a lot, or about to enter a lot. A lot is going on with a lot of us.* The meme brings out what happens around Kenya as a nation. Nyadera et al., (2020) justify the message relayed in the meme by positing that the contemporary Kenyan society is characterized by myriads of challenges posed by ethnicity, fake news, populism, weak institutions and poor economic policies. The meme signifies that the citizens go through a vicious cycle of problems as they struggle to survive.

4.6 Conclusion

The chapter has dealt with how memes have been used to disclose the politics and political conditions in the country. Memes reveal that elections in Kenya are generally competitive in nature. The authors also uncover the existing bribery and corruption practices in the country. In addition, the meme authors advocate for respect of human life particularly by the police. The chapter also highlights that inflation in Kenya has contributed to the high cost of living. The anonymous authors of memes also pinpoint

the prevailing economic stratification, unemployment and the role of natural disasters in hindering economic growth in the country. In addition, the chapter discloses the place of religion among other cultural phenomena in Kenya. In summary, the political, economic and sociocultural landscapes are clearly relayed in the chapter. The next chapter of this research provides a summary of the findings and conclusions of the study and makes possible recommendations for future research

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Overview

This chapter embodies a summary of the findings and conclusions of the research and the recommendations for future studies on the topic. It also shows how far the objectives of the study as indicated earlier have been met.

5.2 Summary of the Findings

This study has undertaken to examine the dominant aesthetic features of memes shared by Kenyans on Facebook and WhatsApp. It has gone further to look into the stereotypes and clichés expressed through the shared memes on the same platforms. It has also established the contemporary political, economic and sociocultural issues expressed through the memes circulated by Kenyans.

The first objective set out to examine the dominant aesthetic features of memes shared by Kenyans. The study found out that memes are attributed to aesthetic features. The findings indicate that memes are used as figures of speech. In this context, memes are characterized by satire, allusion, symbolism and irony. Moreover, the study reveals that some memes take the poetic forms in addition to being used as word plays. Finally the study has discovered that memes makes use of intertextuality to bring out a particular artistic meaning.

To begin with, the study noted that presentation of memes in a figurative way makes the online community in Kenya to understand and relate to the issues addressed by the authors. The writers in metaphors draw comparisons between the unknown and the known. As such, metaphors in memes permit the meme creators to foreground the

unknown to the online community by indirectly comparing it to the known. This enhances a deeper understanding of the subject at hand. The satirical memes have been used to intentionally criticize existing follies in the Kenyan nation with a view to have them corrected. In addition, the use of allusion in memes enables the reader to link what is historically familiar to the unfamiliar to enhance understanding of the text. The study also found out that symbolic memes empowers the reader's creative impetus by making them connect concrete and abstract ideas. Finally, the irony contained in memes brings out existing contradictions in the society. The study therefore realized that the use of memes figuratively gives the author an opportunity to creatively and vividly communicate specific themes contextually.

The poetic presentation of memes reveals the artistic function of memes as a means of expressing feelings and also as a form of entertainment. Some of the memes have been presented musically and rhythmically to capture the reader's attention and create interest. This shows that memes should be classified as subgenre of online literature.

Moreover, the study also found out that memes are characterized by intertextuality, an integration of many texts. Memes combine texts, pictures, graphics and even numbers for effective communication. The pictorials compliment the written texts making it easy for the reader to relate the two and get an in-depth comprehension of the message relayed by the creator of the meme. The first objective was therefore achieved as the research was able to find out the dominant features of meme shared by Kenyans.

The purpose of the second objective was to find out the stereotypes and clichés expressed through memes shared by Kenyans. By examining the memes circulated, the study discovered that the nation is perceived as a poor African country that regularly depends on donors to survive. Such borrowing is thought to attract neocolonialism and negatively affects the economic progress of the country. The state of the nation is also blamed on the leadership that is presumed to pursue self-interest.

The study also discovered that memes express ethnic and gender stereotyping. The generalizations attributed to specific ethnic groups enhance unity through cultural diversities. However, gender stereotyping depicts a country divided along gender roles assigned to men and women. Through gender clichés expressed in memes, Kenya is portrayed as a patriarchal society.

Furthermore, the research uncovered the existing generalizations made about specific groups, individuals, professions and even institutions in Kenya. For instance, the religious are perceived to be hypocritical in nature while the police are associated with brutality and corruption. In addition the medics are characterized by indecipherable handwritings and some of the Kenyan students are characterized by ill-preparedness for examination which culminates to cheating. In addition, the study noticed that the some students dislike mathematics.

Stereotyping contains an integration of what is seen as both good and bad traits about a particular group. However, the study established that more of what is exposed through stereotyping is negative. However, some generalizations contain some truths about a specific target group. The second objective was therefore achieved.

The third objective aimed at establishing how memes revealed the contemporary political, economic and sociocultural issues in Kenya. The findings indicate that the country is characterized by antagonistic leadership and competitive elections. The leadership as shown by the findings is attributed to abuse of power and opportunism.

Further findings from the study of memes in Kenya disclose that the country is believed to be economically vulnerable. Kenyans feel that such a fragile economy is caused by huge foreign debts which in turn lead to over taxation and inflation. This is also attributed to existing corruption within various sectors, unemployment, natural calamities, poverty and disease. However, the study deduced that Kenyans participate in a number of economic activities such as trade, crop farming and poultry keeping among others.

The study also found out that Kenyans engage in various sociocultural phenomena like marriage, sporting and communal mourning among others. The study reveals that Kenyans are generally religious in nature. In addition it was discovered that Kenyans struggle with a major problem of alcohol abuse, a major problem which affects a higher percentage of men. However, it is clear from the study that Kenyans come together to castigate vice and reward virtue for a better nation.

As discussed above, the research was able to achieve the third objective of the study which purposed to find out the contemporary political, economic and sociocultural issues portrayed though memes shared by Kenyans. In view of the foregoing, the study concludes that all the objectives set at the beginning of the research were met.

5.3 Conclusions

The objectives stated at the onset of the study were met using the theoretical framework and research methodology proposed. It has been possible to examine the dominant aesthetic features of the internet memes shared by Kenyans. Literary scholars should therefore reconsider classifying memes as part of the sub-genre of social media literature. As a result, memes can be integrated into the teaching of literature in schools because they provide captivating texts for literary criticism through the social media.

Memes depict the existence of stereotypes and clichés in Kenya. As such, memes provide grounds for social commentaries. According to the study the humour rooted in stereotyping entertains and enhances cultural exchange witnessed through the sharing of relatable experiences across the social media platforms. It is through the memes' fora that Kenyans speak in unity, engage in joint criticism and cultivate a common understanding.

From a literary viewpoint, it can be opined that memes mirror the Kenyan nation politically, socially and economically. In summary, the study concludes that the Internet memes narrate all the phenomena whether social, political or cultural in the country, in a very concise and clear manner; a photo and a text. Memes contain moral lessons and they play a notable emotive role in literature. This is therefore a new art form and a communication media that calls for more scholarly interest on the social media space. Memes should be factored in by the news agencies as social media news in Kenya.

5.4 Recommendations for Further Research

During the research process, a number of new areas that deserve scholarly attention cropped up. This study undertook to find out the dominant aesthetic features of memes shared by Kenyans. Future studies should draw comparisons between the meme as a social media literary text and the traditional short forms of literature such as proverbs, riddles and tongue twisters.

It will be of scholarly interest to investigate the memes shared by Kenyans from the psychoanalytic and meta-modern perspective. This study was limited to postmodernism and semiotic theories. The study also recommends that the future scholars devote their attention to how memes reflect the historical development in Kenya from a literary perspective. Future scholars should focus on the literary role of memes as repertoires of Kenyan history.

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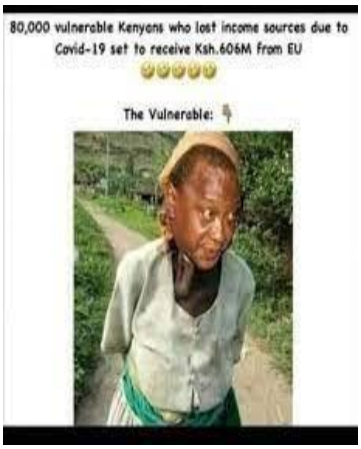
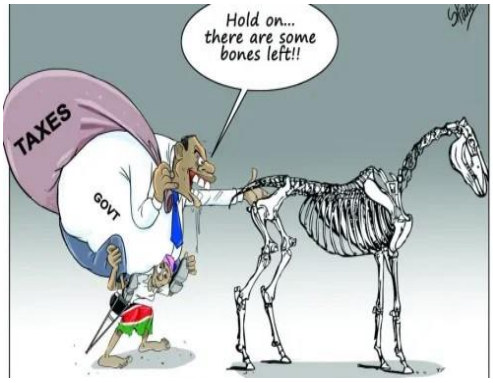
APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: SAMPLE DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

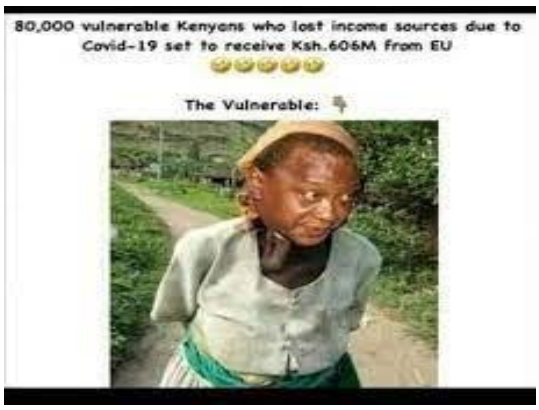
TABLE.

Picture	Meme feature	Theme/Message	Aesthetic Feature	Stereotype
	-Feminized image of Kenyan leader. - Vulnerable Kenyan.	Overdependence on foreign aid. - Neocolonialism. -Opportunism.	- Metaphor. -Intertext -Irony	-Political

APPENDIX II: MEMES USED IN THE STUDY



Meme 1



Meme 2

Meme 3

Meme 4

Meme 5

Meme 6

Meme 7

Meme 8

Meme 9

Meme 10

Meme 11

Meme 12

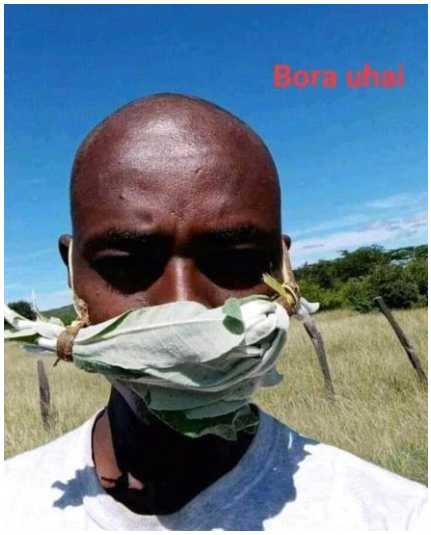
Meme 13

Meme 14

Meme 15

Meme 16

Meme 17



Meme 18

Meme 19

Meme 20

Meme 21

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Meme 30

Meme 31

Meme 32

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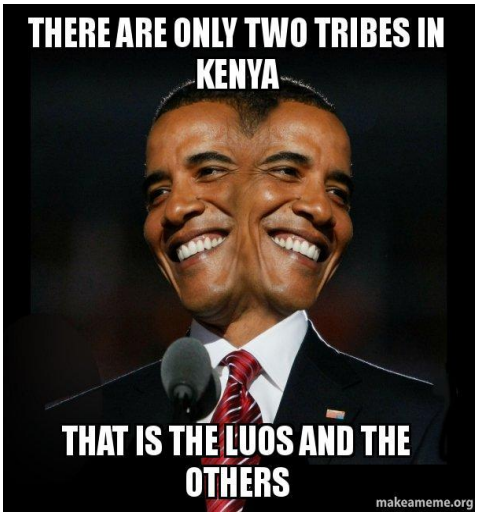
Meme 35



Meme 36

Meme 37

Meme 38

Meme 39

Meme 40

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Meme 60

APPENDIX III: RESEARCH PERMIT NACOSTI

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APPENDIX IV: BGS APPROVAL FOR FIELDWORK

UNIVERSITY OF KABIANGA
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OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR, BOARD OF GRADUATE STUDIES

REF: PGC/LIT/007/19 **DATE: 27TH MARCH, 2024**

Emily Cherop,
Biological Sciences Department,
University of Kabianga,
P.O Box 2030- 20200,
KERICHO.

Dear Ms. Cherop,

RE: CLEARANCE TO COMMENCE FIELD WORK/DATA COLLECTION

I am pleased to inform you that the Board of Graduate Studies has considered and approved your M.A research proposal entitled **"Kenyan Worldview as Portrayed in Memes: A Postmodernist Reading."**

Subsequently the Board has also approved the following supervisors for appointments.

1. Dr. Robert Wesonga
2. Dr. Salim Sawe

You may now proceed to commence field work/data collection on condition that you obtain a research permit from NACOSTI and /or an ethical review permit from a relevant ethics review board.

You are also required to publish one (1) article in a peer reviewed journal, with all your supervisors, before your oral defense of thesis.

You are required to submit through your supervisors, and HoD, progress reports every three months, to the Director, Board of Graduate Studies.

Please note that it is the policy of the University that you complete your studies within three years from the date of registration. Do not hesitate to consult this office in case of any difficulties encountered in the course of your studies.