

SURVIVING ECONOMIC RECESSION THROUGH THE PRODUCTION OF INTERNET COMIC SKITS: THE CASE OF OKOI SIPHON AND DAVID IGWE

Mary Nkechi OKADIGWE, PhD

Department of Theatre & Film Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria
Email: nokadigwe@gmail.com

&

Emmanuel Onyekachukwu EBEEKUE

Department of Theatre & Film Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria
Email: oscarmenia007@gmail.com

Abstract

The economic recession in Nigeria has become a motivation for both positive and negative practices among citizens. Survival is fundamental to man and so man adapts to changes in his environment in order to survive. Recession in Nigeria has brought with it untold hardship to the Nigerian citizenry and this has triggered the ingenuity of the common man in a bid to survive the debilitating economic condition. A certain evidence of this is the surging trend in comic skits that has become ubiquitous in the Nigerian internet space. This article posits that the burgeoned output of comic arts in Nigeria's internet space reflects the current economic recession in Nigeria. The researchers used qualitative research methods in unbundling this claim. The study is hinged on John Marslowe's 'Need Theory'.

Introduction

Economic recession in Nigeria has elicited resilience in a lot of Nigerians whose creative abilities were not hitherto inspired. Many Nigerians have been ignited to use their innate artistic ability and the very many benefits of the internet to keep themselves going in these hard times. The English adage which says that 'every cloud has a silver lining' can be said to be true if related to the current increase in artistic works in Nigeria due to the current economic recession. There has been a sudden hike in the production of internet comic skits in Nigeria which came as a result of the peoples' strives to survive the current economic recession.

Although this artistic work has been in existence before the current All Progressives Congress (APC) leadership, it sees an increase in production and release mostly due to the economic setback brought about by reforms of the current government. Nigeria is currently experiencing economic recession. The country's economy nosedived into inflation in 2016 experiencing a reduction in the oil barrel. Ibenegbu reports that, while

Nigeria was able to produce 2.11 million barrels of oil daily at the beginning of 2016, the country could only produce 1.69 million barrels daily at the end of the same year (asknaij.com). This and other militating factors brought about inflation in the country. So Nigeria has been experiencing one of the worst financial crises in the country since 2016.

Although the recent recession led many Nigerians to groaning and grumbling, many others have been motivated by the hardship of the same economic recession to discover their artistic talents. A lot of Nigerians have been forced by the adverse effect of the recent economic recession to recline and explore their innate talents. It has prompted so many young Nigerians to go into the production and release of internet comedy skits, thereby increasing the number of internet comic sketches in the Nigerian internet sites. One might be prompted to ask how one could yield income from an ordinary short internet video. This and other issues will be the focus of this paper as we go further.

Economic Recession in Nigeria

The economy of Nigeria began to contract in 2015 with the global fall in oil price. The global nose-diving of oil price drastically affected Nigeria's economy because Nigeria is running a mono-economy. Almost all the country's earnings and revenue come from one source, which is oil. Robert Dode reports that, "for the past three decades, oil has accounted for between 80% and 90% of the country's foreign exchange earnings" (3). So, the country's economy began to ebb simultaneously with global oil price. By the mid-2016, the country's economy had started to experience a significant decline. This decline plunged the nation into recession. Nigerian's dwindling economy was also affected negatively by some reforms made by the president Muhammadu Buhari-led administration.

Datatrust Consulting Limited, a firm of financial analysts, had maintained that, Nigeria's economic recession was due to failure in the government's monetary and fiscal policies. In x-raying the Nigerian economy and the banking industry, Datatrust found a major link between the ravaging economic recession and delayed fiscal action on the part of government. Mike Uzor, the chief financial analyst of the firm posits that, "with the long delay in approving the 2016 budget... the policy of Treasury Single Account hindered the ability of monetary policy to sustain the flow of goods and services within the economy". The Datatrust report further suggests that, in 2016, Nigeria's economy experienced a macroeconomic policy lull during which neither fiscal nor monetary policy was effectively deployed to sustain the momentum of the nation's economic activities. Eneji, Mailafia and Umejiaku attribute the economic downturn on the "global oil price shocks and volatility, worsened by oil pipeline vandalism and depletion of foreign reserves by the previous governments" (2). Adetoya, Onuba and Abioye report that the release of 2nd Quarter's Gross Domestic Product figures of 2016 by the National Bureau of Statistics showed that the nation was in recession. The Honourable Minister of Finance, Mrs. Kemi Adeosun said this much when she admitted that, Nigeria was in its worst possible time. Umoru notes that, "Mrs. Kemi Adeosun did not hide the fact that the nation's economy was sick; she told the senators bluntly that Nigeria as a country was in recession and in a very tough place". The local currency has also been devalued. These and other militating factors helped in aggravating the sufferings of the Nigerian masses. Thus, a lot of Nigerians were moved to look inward to device means of surviving the hardships of the economic recession.

The production and release of internet comic skits became a viable alternative source of livelihood to cushion the effects of the economic recession. One of the most popular comic skits in Nigeria, *Mark Angel* and other comic skits motivated others to join this lucrative venture of internet video skits series.

Theoretical Framework

This research experience is predicated on Abraham Marslowe's 'Theory of Need'. The theory is alternatively known as the 'Marslowe's Hierarchy of Needs'. This theory was propounded by Abraham Marslowe in 1943 in a paper, "A Theory of Human Motivation". The theory is a psychological proposition on the hierarchy of human needs. Marslowe categorises the human needs into strata and suggests that the actions of man are proportionally motivated by his desire to fulfill any of his needs. From bottom of the pyramid upwards, the stages are physiological needs, safety needs, love needs and belongingness, esteem needs, and self-actualisation needs.

According to Marslowe, man's psychological growth is a journey through this pyramid. The journey starts from the base (physiological) and graduates through to the stage of self-actualisation. Analysing this theory, Saul McLeod (n.p.) divides the needs in pyramid into two sub-categories: Deficiency needs and growth needs. Physiological needs, safety needs, love needs and esteem needs constitute the 'deficiency needs'; while self-actualisation constitutes the 'growth needs'. The deficiency needs are basic needs. They are needs necessary for the survival of human person. A denial or inability to meet this need therefore may result in demise or stunted growth and progression. Deficiency needs are motivational. They drive the individual to find varied means of ensuring survival. McLeod posits that, "deficiency needs arise due to deprivation and are said to motivate people when they are unmet" (n.p.).

The economic recession in Nigeria threatens this need. Its effect on the basic means of livelihood directly affects the deficiency needs of the citizenry. The rise in unemployment, cost of living and scarcity of food supply directly promotes hunger and this will motivate the affected individuals to creatively devise alternative means of ensuring survival. While some may respond to this motivation negatively by resorting to crime, others equally may employ their creative ingenuities to close up the gap. One of such creative cords that have been resurrected is the internet comedy which is the major preoccupation of this research experience. The choice to stem this research experience on Marslowe's 'Needs Theory' stems from this. The financial hardship that emanated from the economic recession currently suffered by Nigerians has brought with it some positive outputs. In order to make ends meet, a lot of Nigerians have been motivated by untold hardship to seek alternative means of livelihood. The result is an increase in artistic works. One of the artistic works that has recently been proliferated is the internet comic skit. A lot of Nigerians have been motivated to create and shoot their own hilarious web series or skits owing to the difficult times.

Economic Recession in Nigeria as Motivation for increase in Internet Comic Artistes

The economic recession in the country has occasioned a surge in the number of artistes who practice internet based comedy. Many of these have grown big and have become

motivations for others to join. However, for the purpose of this analysis, the researchers will focus on the internet comic arts of David Igwe and Okoi Siphon.

Comedy is the genre of literature that aims at eliciting laughter and creating light moods. It is an old genre which preceded tragedy during the Greek classical era. Brockett opines that, “Greek comedy developed later than did tragedy” (93). It humours its audience through the presentation or representation of human follies. According to Lucas, translation of the *Poetics*, Aristotle in the *Poetics* classifies comedy as a lower art which must imitate the lives of the common people. For Aristotle, according to the English Hawaii’s online post, comedy represents human being as “worse than they are”, but he notes that comic characters are not necessarily evil. They are just ridiculous and laughable. Thus, comedy has evolved over time and has taken different forms depending on the socio-cultural disposition of its host society. Comedy in Nigeria has lasted over time. Stand-up comedy has revolutionised the comedy craft in Nigeria and made it a worthwhile profession. Aderibigbe Tolulope reports that it has become a source of livelihood to many Nigerians who in recent times have become superstars, celebrities and millionaires from the stand-up comedy craft (para.1).

However, with the advent of the social media, there has begun a radical cross in medium. While stand-up comedy still thrives in live shows, the social media have given comedy a more viral access to designated audiences. Tinkafrica.com posits that, “social media is slowly snatching the mic from the stand-up comedians and is handing it over to a new breed of jokers, winning mostly the millennials and a bit of the generation before them”.

Internet comic skit is a single dramatised short and funny theatrical performance on the internet. It is a theatrical genre comprising a series of short funny scenes or vignette performances on the internet. It has its origin in the vaudeville which was especially popular in the United States of America and Canada in the early 1880s until 1930s. A typical vaudeville performance was made of up a series of separate, unrelated acts grouped together on a common bill. It include among others: one-act plays or scenes from plays, singers, dancers, comedians and movies. It emerged in the contemporary times as web series.

Web series became a possible alternative to traditional series production which was formerly mostly done for broadcast and cable television. It is a series of screenplays or non-scripted videos generally in episodic form released on the internet. The QuantumLink Serial is considered the first episodic online series. Swaine posits that, “it is a pioneering work of episodic online fiction by the American writer Tracy Reed” (7). However, according to Swaine, the Spot or thespot.com created by an American, Scott Zakarin, was the first website to integrate episodic online story, photos and videos and what later became known as blogs into storylines. It was the second online story after an experiment by AOL’s QuantumLink Serial.

The rise in popularity of the internet and improvements in the accessibility and affordability of high speed broadband and streaming video technology facilitated the production and distribution of web series. In addition to these is the fact that internet series are less expensive to produce. This has allowed a wider range of creators to develop internet series, encouraging ordinary Nigerians who might not have been able to produce the traditional television series (which is more expensive to produce) to produce internet comic

skits. These videos are made available online. The internet enables these producers to reach potentially global audience who can access the videos 24 hours a day and seven days a week at their own convenience, whether they are at home or on the go. Also encouraged by the rising affordability of tablets and smart-phones, more people have entered the trade. Owing to this advantage, producers are able to reach wider range of potential viewers including commuters and travellers who are on the go.

The emerging potential for success in internet video has caught the attention of thriving Nigerian citizenry especially at this period of economic recession. Those who have been attracted to this trade use social media and social networking platforms, such as, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter, to mention the most popular among the social media, to market their internet videos and seek increase in viewership. They also monitor these social media and networking comments as ways of obtaining fan feedback on their performance.

Siphon Okoi: A Brief Introduction

Kalistus Yawa is the brand name used by Siphon Okoi to arrange and present his comic skits. Siphon Okoi is a native of Eket, Akwa Ibom State. He attended Government Secondary School in Karu, Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory, and later obtained his first degree from the Sango-Ota Polytechnic, Ogun State, where he studied Business Administration. Siphon Okoi is one of the most hilarious and humorous comedians to have graced the internet comic skit art in Nigeria. His sense of humour is greatly burgeoned and further pronounced by his frail looks which most times complement themes of poverty, street hustle and dubiousness that characterise the *Yawa* series.

Siphon Okoi's Comedy Series

The *Yawa* comedy series is mostly designed to showcase the daily hardship the common man faces in his quest to survive the economic downturn. Siphon, in a bid to tell the stories of this ubiquitous hardship which has enveloped the common man in Nigeria, takes on different characters and situates them within the life of an average man. For the purpose of this analysis, the researcher will discuss Siphon Okoi's internet skits using the following episodes: *BVN* (Episode 5), *The Job Seeker* (Episode 6), and *Sharp Guy*.

Synopsis of *BVN*

In *BVN*, Siphon (playing the role of Calistus) impersonates the role of a typical Nigerian fraudster. He hoodwinks a gullible man into giving him his bank verification number (BVN) with which he siphons all the money in the man's bank account. As a result, the man begins to torment him through phone calls. He throws away his SIM card and buys a new one in a bid to escape the torment but the man mysteriously begins to call him on the new one and continues to torment him. As he throws away the phone, the mystery caller uses the phones of people nearby to call Calistus. His several attempts at escaping the mysterious caller only brings more torment. Calistus loses his quiet and is knocked down by a car. However, Calistus wakes up on a bench and realises that it was a flash dream.

Discussion

Fraud has become a burgeoning business in Nigeria most especially among the youth. While *Yahoo Yahoo*, as it is popularly called, dates back to the 1970s, it has suddenly become an envied life style among many people especially the youths in this era. The reason is simple and conspicuous; hardship. The need to survive the recession induced difficulty has made many youths to begin to fancy crime and other illegal ways of making money. This only solidifies Marslowe's positions in his need theory that the drive to fulfil a particular need can be motivational in itself. However, in the case of Calistus, the motivation is more negative than positive. Rather than channel his frustrations into a positive creative endeavour, Calistus responds to the pangs of hunger by devising means of defrauding people of their hard earnings. The case of Calistus is a simulacrum of the Nigerian society in the face of economic recession where many youths have responded to the frustrations of job loss, unemployment, hunger and hopelessness by transforming their creative abilities into negative endeavours dangerously. This accounts for the unimaginable boost in the number of youths who pride themselves in fraud and public celebrate the ill-gotten wealth. However, Siphon Okoi rather than responding to the pushing of negatively like Calistus redirects his frustrations to positive minded ventures. He rather tells the story of the many misguided youths who engage in the business of fraud and makes a living from it. He, however, does not fail to show that the glitters that come with fast money does not last; and that, perpetrators of evil are liable to their actions.

Synopsis of *The Job Seeker*

In *The Job Seeker*, Siphon impersonates an unemployed electrical engineer. He designs a placard on which is written 'Graduate but unemployed' and dubiously collects money from sympathetic Nigerians who fall to his antics. People feel pity for him and begin to give him money with which to take care of himself until he gets a job. Unfortunately, Calistus becomes more comfortable with the money he is given out of sympathy and becomes a con artist. He refuses to accept real job offers so he can collect the sympathy money that comes with the placard. Unfortunately, Karma catches up on him as a contractor decides to offer him a job to repair malfunctioning circuit. Rather than open up to his folly, he accepts to do the job. He cuts the wrong wire and he gets electrocuted though he does not die. He abandons the man and leaves the office.

Discussion

Okoi Siphon once more presents Calistus as a vulnerable youth faced with the most basic in Marslowe's hierarchy of needs. He is jobless and as a result is perpetually hungry which affects his confidence as a person. Just as Marslowe posited, Calistus is motivated by the need to meet his need for food and security. He begins to carry placards in a desperate move to get a job. Unfortunately, Calistus loses sight of his intent and recreates his motives to immediate gratification and like in episode five, he becomes a con star. Okoi Siphon has a way of presenting worrisome national issues while living out his comic carrier. He does not fail to show the many negative effects of the hopelessness that faces the Nigerian youths. Abandoned by government and left on their own, Okoi Siphon once more shows

the many consequences the society will suffer for not paying attention to able youths who are frustrated daily by stories of hopelessness.

Unemployment in the country is a reality that did not come with the economic recession of 2015/2016. It is a reality that has been with the country which many past governments have been struggling. However, the event of the recession has only made it worse as many who even had jobs prior to the recession have either been completely laid off or have had their salaries drastically slashed. This in effect has seen many more youths wondering the streets frustrated, angry, jobless, hopeless and visionless. It is obvious that Siphon Okoi taps his motivation from these narratives that are rife in every corner of the country. Once more, rather than channelling his frustrations to negative use, Siphon Okoi is positively motivated to employ his creative ingenuity to meet his needs by tapping from the stories of despair that has become ubiquitous in Nigeria with the economic recession. This is also very evident in many other of his *Yawa* series. In *Man Must Chop* and *Sharp Guy*, Siphon Okoi continues with his narrative of the drive to fulfil the basic needs that have been made more ridiculous by the taunts of a recessed economy.

About David Igwe

Osas Comedy is propelled by David Igwe, who is an Awka-based comedian, popularly known as, Osas. He studied Theatre Arts at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria, and graduated in 2013. He started his comedy series in 2015. His comic skit, *Longest Name in Africa*, has had over 1.2million views on YouTube, as at the time of this study. Three of David Igwe's internet comic skits will be discussed, specifically, *Come and Join me*, *Blood Money*, and *Otapiapia*.

Synopsis of *Come and Join Me*

Osas in *Come and join* is worried by hunger. He goes to buy food on credit and comes home to eat it. A friend visits with his girlfriend and Osas innocently invites them to join him in eating the food out of courtesy. The friend and his girlfriend pounce on the food and finish it to Osas's consternation.

Synopsis of *Blood Money*

In *Blood Money*, Osas is faced with hunger and despair as a jobless youth. He discovers a hospital, where he can sell his blood for money. He sells the blood and tells his friends, who are addicts to betting. The friends rush out to go and sell theirs too. In the process, one of them dies.

Synopsis of *Otapiapia*

Bank Robber tells the story of three jobless youths, who, in a bid to make money and escape poverty, decide to go and rob a bank. However, they decide to fortify themselves against bullets. They ask a native doctor to prepare the amulets for them. After preparing the ritual and fortifying them the native doctor decides to test the amulets. And to do this, he has to shoot one of them to demonstrate the potency of the amulet. To their consternation, the bullet pierces the body of their colleague, who slumps to the ground and dies. They all panic and run away.

Discussion

In *Come and Join me*, David paints the picture of jobless youths, who must feed against all odds. David showcases the level of hunger, which people pass through as a result of the economic downturn being experienced in the country. David buys a plate of food to eat and then extends the customary invitation to his friend to join him to eat. To his greatest disappointment, the friend immediately produces a spoon from his back pocket and within the twinkling of an eye, eats up the whole food with his girlfriend to David's consternation.

The theme of recession and its effects is further explored in *Blood Money*. In this episode, Osas, an applicant, sees an advert blood donation which is paid for. He visits the address and sells his blood at five hundred naira (N5000.00) per pint. He comes home only to meet his friends who are greatly aggrieved over the loss of the money they had staked in pool betting. He tells them the 'good' news and the two rush out to the blood centre to sell their blood against the admonition of others. The episode ends as Osas and the rest of his friends are seen carrying the lifeless bodies of the two, who went to donate blood, in a wheel barrow.

In *Otapiapia*, David further showcases the plight of the youth in the face of a most debilitating economy. In the bid to escape the hunger and desperation that has engulfed them as the result of Joblessness, Osas and his friends resolve to rob a bank. To do that, they would need protective amulets (*odeshi*) that could protect them from machete cuts or gun shots. As a result, they visit the shrine of a native doctor, Akirika, who readily takes them through some rituals. At the end, in a bid to test the potency of the charm he has prepared for them, he decides to shoot one of them. Osas volunteers do the test and he is killed as Akirika's bullet penetrates through his heart.

All these little comic skits from Osas clearly show the state of desperation by the youth in the Nigerian nation. Through his art and creative ability, David Igwe, like Siphon Okoi, showcase the challenges people are confronted with due to the current economic recession. They may be comic, but they x-ray the underbelly of the current harsh economic conditions in the country.

Conclusion

Precious minerals are most times discovered in the belly of dumps buried millions of miles beneath the earth surface. In the same vein, this research experience has shown that while the recession represents tales of mares and horrors for many Nigeria youths, some others in the likes of Siphon Okoi and David Igwe have creditably explored these tales of woes and horror as viable motivations to spring the art careers. The truth of Marslowe's assertion that needs are springboards (n.p.) for motivation have best been made manifest in the works of the two artistes in discuss. While some may argue that the recession may not have been their sole motivation for embracing the internet comic skits art, this work have proven that the recession has provided with creative elements on which their careers have trended. The researchers therefore conclude that the internet comic skits in Nigeria have had a humongous boost through the instrumentality of the economic recession that proven a great source of motivation for many of its artistes.

Works Cited

- Adeniran, Adetayo and Sidiq, Ben O. "Economic Recession and the Way-Out: Nigeria as Case Study". *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: E Economics*, 2018. file:///C:/Users/Obinna%20O/Desktop/1-Economic-Recession-and-the-Way.pdf
- Aderibigbe, Tolulope. "Nigeria: Lucrative Nature of Stand-Up Comedy in Nigeria". 2014. *All Africa*. 2 Aug. 2018 <<https://allafrica.com/stories/201409011128.html>>
- Aristotle. *Aristotle's Poetics*. Lucas, Donald W. (Trans.). London: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Aristotle. "On Comedy". www.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/aristotle/terms/comedy.html
- Blood Money*. Dir. David Igwe. Perf. David Igwe, 2017.
- BVN Alert*. Dir. Braimah. Perf. Siphon Okoi. 2016.
- DataTrust. "The Cabel". 20 Mar. 2017. Datatrust: Recession an Outcome of Monetary, Fiscal Policy Failure. Sept. 2017 <<https://www.thecable.ng/datatrust-recession-an-outcome-of-monetary-fiscal-policy-failure>>
- Dode, Robert. "Nigeria, Mono-Product Economy & the Global Economic Recession: Problems and Prospects". *Global Journal of Human Social Science Sociology, Economics & Political Science*, (2012): 1-9.
- Eneji, Mathias. Agri, Dimis Mailafia and Umejiaku Rose Ijeoma . "Impact of Economic Recession on Macroeconomic Stability and Sustainable Development in Nigeria." *Science Journal of Economics*, (2017): 1-12.
- Ibenegbu, George. "History of Recession in Nigeria". Mar. 2017. <<https://www.naija.ng/1114852-history-recession-nigeria.html#1114852>>
- Job Seeker*. Dir. Karsim Braimah. Perf. Momoh Osigwe, David Ntong Siphon Okoi. Prod. Karsim Braimah, 2015.
- Man Must Chop*. Dir. Karsin Braimah. Perf. Nnemeka Nwaorgu, Goodness Kwame, Amina Ahmed, Siphon Okoi, 2016.
- McLeod, Saul. "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs". *Simply Psychology*. 3 Aug. 2018. <<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>>
- Naij.Com. "Causes of economic recession in Nigeria". 3 Aug. 2018. <https://naija.ng.ng/1089241-causes-economic-recession-nigeria.html>
- Obasi, Ogochukwu N. "The Oil Price Fall and the Impact on the Nigerian Economy: A Call for Diversification". *Journal of Law, Policy and Globalisation*, 48(2016). <https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JLPG/article/viewFile/30149/30965>.
- Okeke, Remi. "The Political Economy of Recession in Nigeria". *Research Gate*, 2 Aug. 2018 <<https://www.researchgate.net/publication>>
- Otapiapia*. Dir. David Igwe. Perf. Ajama Philip, David Igwe, 2017.

- Shido-Ikwu, Benjamin S. "Economic Recession in Nigeria: A Case for Government Intervention". *International Journal of Economics and Management Studies*, 4(2017).
- Swaine, Meg. *Digital Career Building: Career Building through Alternative Reality Gaming*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group Inc., 2008.
- Tinkafrica. "Internet Comedians: The Future of the Nigerian Comedy Scene". 19 Apr. 2017. *Think*. Sept. 2017. <<http://www.tink-africa.com/stories/are-internet-comedians-really-taking-over-the-nigerian-comedy-space>>
- Vanguardngr.com. "Economic Recession in Nigeria: Challenges and Solution".
- Yawa – The Sharp Guy*. Dir. Karsin Braimah. Perf. Okoi Siphon, 2016.