

**“BY JUNE, EVERYONE WOULD HAVE DIED”:
HISTORICISING HUMOUR DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN GHANA**

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Abstract: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human interactions deeply affected the sense of humour of individuals. Using a social media research approach, this article analyses social media data in order to understand how social media users related with COVID-19. We sought to address the various events that generated humour among Ghanaians during the pandemic. The study reveals that the various instances of humour revolved around nose and/or face masks, terminologies and various social media posts. People neutralised their tensions and raised their humour with posts that flooded social media. This stemmed from the idea that people were mainly surprised at what they saw, watched or heard as they sought to release stress. We conclude that, owing partially to the creation of humour, the fear and tension associated with COVID-19 decreased with time among Ghanaians.

Keywords: *Ghana, humour, COVID-19 pandemic, “By June,” nose mask*

Introduction

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has robbed the world of its resources including the lives of many people. As a viral disease, COVID-19 affected almost all countries across the world (MacLaren et al. 2020; Paules et al. 2020; Nishiura et al. 2020). At the dawn of its outbreak, stakeholders adopted various protocols against its spread. These measures included ensuring good personal hygiene, avoiding group gatherings and the imple-

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mentation of social isolation policies (Jackson et al., 2020; Shao et al., 2020). This notwithstanding, statistics indicate that the disease fast-spread in the world with 17,344,539 global reported cases, out of which over 2 million lost their lives by the end of May 2021 (WHO 2020).

With the aid of media reportage, the Ghanaian public was addressed when Ghana recorded her first two cases of the pandemic on 12 March 2020 (Ministry of Health 2020). Since then, the country has witnessed an exponential spread of the virus with over 84,000 cases, with the anticipation for future increase, as of 1 March 2021. The response of the Ghanaian government to the virus was rapid. At its inception, expressed in what the government termed as the 3Ts, the government aimed to “trace, test and treat” the affected patients by increasing surveillance mechanisms. Significantly, all travellers who entered the country from March 2020 were mandatory quarantined for a period of two weeks, the period believed to be the maximum number of days for asymptomatic patients to start developing symptoms (Paules et al. 2020).

The daily increase in cases has nurtured a sense of anxiety and panic among the people and affected the humour and psychological well-being of citizens. However, since the first two COVID-19 cases on 12 March, the mortality rate of the disease has stood below 1% (Ministry of Health 2020). Records show that most of the people who died of the virus were persons with underlying chronic health conditions (GHS 2020; de-Graft Aikins et al. 2020; D’Adamo et al. 2020; Jackson et al. 2020; Ruiz-Estrada and Koutronas 2020). What is encouraging is that most people who contracted the virus recovered within a few weeks or months. This fully accentuated the hopes held by the general populace concerning the epidemic (Ministry of Health 2020).

Throughout the history of the country, humour has played an important and valuable role in Ghana and has been an integral part of Ghanaian culture. Among others, humour in Ghana involves insults, ridicule, mockery and invectives (Ofori 2019). Like all geographical settings, humour in Ghana is placed within a contextual setting. In fact, to refer to “a comedian as a fool” in Ghana is not necessarily offensive but a firm ground for emphasising the mastery of such a comedian in the art of making people laugh (Csajbok-Twerefou 2011: 332).

A sense of humour has always been regarded as a positive and desirable characteristic of an individual with the general assumption that individuals

with good sense of humour are always able to cope with stress and enjoy better physical and mental health (Martin 2019). Proponents of this view argue that there is “evidence for positive effects of humour and laughter on the cardiovascular system” (Bast and Berry 2014). Indeed, humour is reported to serve “as an analgesic and boosts the immune system—in addition to being an effective stress reduction coping mechanism” (Bast and Berry 2014). Significantly, it has been reported that being able to maintain a humorous outlook amidst stress and to “see the funny side” of threatening life problems are coping skills that lead to higher levels of resilience and emotional well-being (Martin 2019).

In the face of threatening events, humorous tendencies have proven worthy in controlling anxieties. During the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, the literature reported that the people across the globe engaged in humorous activities to adjust to isolation, sickness and death (Foss 2020). Similarly, in the event of the holocaust, a documentary, *The Last Laugh*, showcased the role of humour amidst the mass murder of the Jews (Williams 2020). The literature reports that humour and its expression are associated with better health development with particular impact on vital systems of the human body such as the respiratory system (Ford et al., 2016). It is equally suggested that the absence of humour or what the literature appropriately terms as disparagement humour has the proclivity to adversely affect the health and social relations of individuals (Ford et al. 2016).

Significantly, there have been studies that focused on the use of humour as a complementary therapy (Bennett and Lengacher 2008). For instance, Ford and his contemporaries report that awareness of the relationship between humour and mental health has led to the incorporation of humour-based therapies into mainstream mental health delivery (Ford et al. 2016).

During the outbreak of COVID-19, the literature reported that social media covered both international and local responses (Wallis and Nerlich 2005; Tsung-Jen et al. 2008). In Ghana, the media played a major role concerning the provision of the needed information on the virus. Aside furnishing the public with daily updates of the situation, the media engaged in massive education on the required protocols to mitigate the spread of the virus. As the COVID-19 numbers grew higher, the pandemic gained currency on Ghanaian social media platforms. In Ghana, a renowned trope “*By June deee, na obia awu*¹” became very pronounced on social media platforms,

¹ “By June Deee, Na Obia Awu” is a Ghanaian language (Twi) expression of “By June, Everyone Would Have Died.”

especially; on twitter, to create, raise and heighten humour amidst the scare of the pandemic (Anokye 2020).

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, scholars have provided data on the nature of the pandemic, its impact and measures taken by states to fight same (see: Frimpong 2020; de-Graft Aikins et al. 2020, Adu-Gyamfi et al. 2021). Also, the existing literature pays seminal attention to the fact that the pandemic created tension among all stakeholders of health across the globe, and Ghana in particular. Across the globe and in Ghana in particular, some individuals and groups found means to create humour amidst the scare and tension created by the pandemic (Williams 2020). Notwithstanding, the literature has little information on the nature, essence and availability of humour amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Significantly, as an emerging field, existing studies have partially addressed humour during COVID-19 in Ghana. We seek to contribute to the discourse by studying humour by way of historicising it during the COVID-19 era in Ghana.

By focusing on Ghana, the current study seeks to address the various events that generated humour and why they are considered humourous amongst the citizens of Ghana and the world at large during the COVID-19 pandemic. By dwelling on some selected theories on humour, we aim at analysing social media posts during the course of the pandemic which sparked humour among the citizens of Ghana. This will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the COVID-19 pandemic and the literature on humour and health.

Theoretical Underpinning

The current study finds the theory of humour appropriate for discussions on the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana. The concept of humour is as old as humanity (Dean 1997; Carell 2008). The term has been assigned different meanings within the literature with varying cognitions and behaviours (Martin 2019). Since the era of Aristotle, several studies and explanations have been advanced toward developing comprehensive views and conceptualisations of the term (Moniek and Patti 2004; Martin 2019). Over the years, there have been three major theories of humour: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory (Moniek and Patti 2004).

Proponents of the relief theory argue that people laugh because they want to release psychological tensions since a sense of humour is believed to be

an important aspect of positive psychology (Carrell 2008; Moniek and Patti 2004; Martin 2019). The tendency of relieving tensions with humour has flooded discourses on humour. During the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic and the holocaust, the role of humour in these events have been fully discussed (Williams 2020). Applied to the era of COVID-19, people who were overburdened with the news and fears of the pandemic, engaged in humourous activities to release their tensions. In this regard, the theory assumes that laughter and mirth result in a release of nervous energy (Moniek and Patti 2004).

On the other hand, the superiority theory argues that people laugh because they feel superior and triumphant over others (Duncan 1985; Morreall 1986; Lintott 2016). Humour in this sense assumes an emotional function aiding the humourist to build confidence and self-esteem (Moniek and Patti 2004). However, according to scholars, laughing at someone can be injurious, socially dangerous and detrimental to relational networks (Chiodo et al. 2020). Thus, while laughing at or creating jokes about COVID-19 may be positive, laughing at the plight of someone affected with COVID-19 would be considered inhumane and injurious to victims.

From the perspective of incongruity theory too, it is argued that people laugh at things that appear surprising and unexpected (Morreall 1986; Wilkins, 2009). To them, things appear surprising and unexpected because of the context in which things are used or because of their combination with other factors that make such a combination incongruous. This theory emphasises cognition and may be conducive to psychological health and well-being, while others may derail the health of people (Moniek and Patti 2004; Martin 2019). Inferences from this theory on humour suggest that the different terminologies created to describe the pandemic, the different and assorted nose masks used and comedies associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana created surprising moods which encouraged people in Ghana and across the globe to enrich their humourous tendencies.

The current contribution pays significant attention to the levels of humour that were expressed among Ghanaians in media reports concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. Significantly, the study adopts two major theories: the relief theory and the incongruity theory of humour. The study applies these theoretical constructs to cases in which people engage in laughter as a therapeutic tool in order to deal with fear created by the COVID-19 and because they became surprised and found some things funny concerning the

COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, our contribution is based on cases in which people regarded humour as a relief from fear, panic and anxiety and as surprising and funny situations stemming from the fight against the outbreak of a deadly and fearful pandemic.

Methods of Study

The study involves both primary and secondary data. Primarily, the study involves the analysis of social media data in an attempt to understand how social media users relate to the COVID-19 outbreak and the humour associated with this outbreak in the Ghanaian context. We have made use of important social media platforms in order to aggregate data related to the objects of the study.

The collection of data involved the observation and tracking of posts on social media. Significantly, we observed the content and information produced online on social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp Statuses, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram from January to August 2020 in order to uncover the trends of humour that emerged during the outbreak of COVID-19. Primarily, our goal was to understand how the conversation and behaviour of audiences on social media channels led to the dissemination of humour during the outbreak of the pandemic. Hashtag tracking was used to learn and understand the hashtags that were more salient and viral among audiences during the outbreak. The hashtags that were used to track data included: #COVID-19, #coronavirusghana, #lockdown, and #byJune.

In the process of collecting data for the study, the authors were very selective on which post to be included. Selection of data and narratives were based on personal preferences. Also, we focussed on social media users' reactions to posts in order to select data for the discourse. Concerning this, we selected posts that had more than five thousands reactions. With regard to spoken and written posts, we selected those that have been expressed in the local Akan and English languages. In our course of selection, we came across over fifty humour posts, out of which we based on the criteria selected above those that can be used to achieve our objective. We targeted these selection criteria in order to convert social media contents into information and themes to generate knowledge (Lai and To 2015).

The data collected from the various social media platforms were analysed qualitatively using a narrative analysis. From the narrative analysis, we were able to analyse the content of data from the various social media platforms

under review. The analysis involved the identification, examination and interpretation of the patterns of humour on social media to examine how social media users relate to the COVID-19 outbreak and the humour associated with this outbreak in the Ghanaian context. Considering the hybrid nature of the subject, we traced the opinions, feelings and impressions of consumers in order to analyse in a narrative from the data obtained.

On the other hand, we gleaned our secondary data from both relevant academic and scientific sources. The academic sources included information from published books and journal articles. Concerning academic sources, we performed a thorough search in databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Elsevier and PubMed in order to locate scientific materials involving humour and COVID-19 in Ghana. Also, data was gleaned from the websites of the World Health Organization, Ministry of Health and Ghana Health Service. The various secondary sources were used to support the social media data.

The information obtained from social media and our observations were corroborated with the literature survey. Relevant data were organised and analysed thematically so as to discuss the Ghanaian situation of humour during the Coronavirus outbreak. Documents and reports were severally perused by the authors in order to gain knowledge and understanding of the key issues for a coherent analysis of the study.

COVID-19 and Humour in Ghana

Several events including wars, epidemics and political violence among many others have caused various tensions and stress around the world. In Africa, aside from the above, the stress associated with problems such as poverty, diseases, streetism and malnutrition have also been a reality since, at least, the post-colonial era (Baffoe and Dako-Gyeko 2013). During the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, initially, people across the world and Ghanaians in particular were burdened physically and mentally considering the global impacts associated with the disease.

The use of humour and laughter as mechanisms for releasing tension has been in existence since time immemorial (Carrell 2008). The work of Dean (1997) reports that humour has been present since at least the era of the Old Testament. In Proverbs it has been stipulated that “a glad heart is excellent medicine” (Dean 1997: 34). The fact that Ghanaians always reduce poten-

tial chaotic situations to fun moments (Ofori 2019) suggests that humour would rise from the COVID-19 era in the country.

Historically, evidence suggests that the use of humour during pandemics is not new. The studies of Park and Park (2010) and Foss (2020) have indicated that humour played a pivotal role in the Cholera and Spanish Flu pandemic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. Park and Park (2010) analysed arts to discuss the fear and humour enshrined in the Cholera pandemic of the nineteenth century. They report that as humour creates a space for citizens to cope with tension, satirists during the 1830s in Sunderland excelled through their ability to create humour among English citizens.

Ghanaians have always developed ways of making themselves happy and enhancing their humour even during difficult situations (Csajbok-Twerefou 2011). Issues revolving around society, education, economics and politics have always been made fun of (Reinsch 2020). During economically difficult years in the 1980s, citizens found meaningful ways to wear smiles (Reinsch 2020). A study by de-Graft Aikins (2020) has argued that during the outbreak of serious pandemics including the flu, HIV/AIDs and Ebola Virus, Ghanaians used creative arts, which mostly featured satiric tendencies to transmit the local understanding of such outbreaks.

Similarly, at the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ghanaians developed strategies to cope with the stress associated with it. These strategies included the use of satiric expressions and other creative arts in order to communicate hope and resilience in the face of the threat (de-Graft Aikins 2020). Popular among these was a satirical video in which a comedian used Twi expressions to replace the English alphabets transmitting public health messages across the country (de-Graft Aikins 2020) and to improve the sense of humour of consumers. The improvement of humour within an era associated with tensions has the proclivity to enhance the positive psychology and, generally, the mental health of individuals (Martin 2019). Under the sections that follow, we explore humour at the time of COVID-19 in Ghana.

Terminological Humour

At the outbreak of the virus, Ghanaians localised the terminologies associated with the virus. Pertinent among the localised terminologies that flooded social media included “*colona bilus*,” “*han-santasa*,” “*colonial virus*” and

“*ros mas*” to represent “corona virus,” “hand sanitizer” and “nose masks” respectively. In these cases, the sense of humour comes from the incongruity in the pronunciation of these terms. People found it odd and funny to associate these locally created terminologies with the original versions of such words. Literate people in particular burst into laughter on hearing such terms. Aside its humorous feature, the use of the term “colonial virus” rehashes the understanding of the pandemic from the perspective of conspiracy theoreticians in relation to the origin of the pandemic.

Significantly, most funny Ghanaians, as a means to boost their mental health amidst the pandemic, made some names viral on social media (Pulse 2020). Names for newborn babies were suggested by Ghanaians to suit the pandemic (Pulse 2020). In a voice note that was circulating, the speaker reported that:

Babies born in the midst of the pandemic would be given names that will keep Ghanaians informed about the virus. This will include names like Emmanuel Lockdownson, Kukua Quarantineson, Aba Sanitiser, Handwash Aba Daazie, Sanitizer Fiifi Grant, Corona Kukua Ferguson, Covid Koomson, Quarantine Richardson by the Fante ethnic group; then the Ewes will continue; Corovi Dagba Kojo, Covid Vigoducure Selase, Nosemask Agbenuvor, Gadagba Facemask Kekeli; and then the Asantes will follow suit with Appiah Colona; Asare Qualantine; Adusei Vilus ... (Pulse 2020)

Under the comment section, someone commented: “I go die ooh. Very funny. At least one can laugh in this difficult time”. Another comment also read: “This is actually a sensible way for mental therapy and stress release; a good laugh is better than negativity” (Pulse 2020).

From the data above, it can be inferred that while the speaker hoped to control his tension in the midst of the pandemic, it equally appeared laughable to Ghanaians coming across the video and audio. Significantly, this form of humour can be traced from both the relief and incongruity features. To a large extent, it appears self-evident that most of the citizens were compelled to engage in laughter as a means of relieving stress and tension. That notwithstanding, from the incongruity feature of humour, it can be argued that the creative style adopted by the video creator might appear surprising

to other observers who might also engage in laughter as a result of being amazed. It is surprising because of the context in which these names were created and, secondly, the association of terms from the pandemic with typically Ghanaian names. This is what brings about laughter. These combinations are incongruous and funny according to the Fante and Ewe ideology and names. Nobody wants a bad name in Ghana, and certainly not a name that has something to do with a pandemic.

Akan names point to the bearer's hope and aspiration and can be used to determine the person's religious beliefs and his/her philosophy of life and death (Obeng 1998). From a similar point, Arko-Achemfour (2018) has argued that within the Akan scheme of things, the name given to a person at birth can affect the behaviour and destiny of such person (Arko-Achemfour 2018). In that regard, being named after a threat, a pandemic and disease would sound odd among the Akans. In fact, it would mean that such a person's name evokes a sense of bad luck within the community. Bearing such names associated with a pandemic would serve as a collective memory for future generations concerning these passing moments.

We suggest, with inferences from the data above, that the creation of local terminologies for the virus had the proclivity of boosting the mental health of individuals as proposed by the literature. The work of scholars such as Bast and Berry (2014), Ford et al. (2016) and Martin (2019), among many others, are in line with the current finding. It was reported in a more recent study that seeing the funny aspect of threatening social problems serves as a therapy for psychological well-being, enabling people to control stress (Martin 2019).

“By June” Humour on Social Media

It has been reported that the use of social media increases during disasters (Fraustino and Ma 2015). People rely on social media for information, humour and levity and for convenience among others during disasters (Fraustino and Ma 2015). At the inception of the virus in Ghana, one phrase that became very renowned was the *“By June deee, na obia awu.”* According to Anokye (2020), this trope was widely used on social media in order to create, raise and heighten the sense of humour of individuals amidst the scare of the pandemic (Anokye 2020). The two pictures below show some posts on Twitter using the *“By June”* humour.

Figure 1: A Twitter Post Emphasising the Use of “By June Dee” to Create COVID-19 Prevention Awareness

Our ignorance and hypocrisy will continue to affect the fight of #COVID19 in Ghana
People ain't ready to stay home or avoid social distancing. We keep saying "By June de3 na obiaa awu" for fun but individually we need to use our local languages to create awareness Ghana 🇵🇸 B3y3yie



Source: Nana Hook 2020

Figure 2: A Twitter Post with Caption “By June Dee” Expressing Anxiety Over the Rise in COVID-19 Mortalities in Ghana

Fellow ghanaians this x our fate now
hmmmm By June de3 🤔🤔
#coronavirusghana #lockdownextension
#GyaeMe



3 1 40

Source: King Pilato 2020

Reference to the above figures (1 and 2) demonstrates posts on Twitter concerning the *By June* phrase. From figure 1, the user made reference to the fact that most Ghanaians’ attitude affected the fight against the pandemic. In the second figure, the user posted the number of recorded cases and death rate to infer that if care was not taken, humans in Ghana would be extinct by June. This “By June” phrase is incongruous because everyone expected the pandemic to end and spare human life; not to annihilate humanity. The person who made such utterance appeared not to be concerned about death, but in reality, he was telling the truth about the Ghanaian attitude towards the pandemic.

Social media users also made funny cartoon videos on several events about COVID-19 in Ghana. On YouTube, a cartoon video of the president was made in which the president stated:

Fellow Ghanaians,
I have come into your homes again, this evening to provide you with updates as I promised... It is sad; it is unfortunate... we are thus about to enter into a critical phase of our fight against the virus in the coming week... I am confident.... Reports I have received so far indicate.... By June deee, na obia awu ... (Amot 2020)

Literarily translated as “By June, everyone would have died,” the phrase was widely used by Ghanaians. The above quote is full of humour considering the positive high note on which the President started his speech and the anti-climactic note on which the speech ended. Expressions such as “I am confident” and “Reports I have received so far” seem to point to the ending of the pandemic or at least, a reduction in the infection rates or death rates only for the President to end his infamous speech with the By June expression. It is not only incongruous but funny and full of suspense. The seminal work of Foss (2020) draws our attention to the fact that during the 1918 pandemic, terminologies appeared in poems, newspaper articles, songs and jokes in order to help neutralise the heartaches created by the pandemic. Similarly, it can be argued that Ghanaians used the above phrase to mock the level of healthcare development in the country. The healthcare situation of Africa has been fragile since time immemorial (Mazibuko 2019). With this in mind, it heightened the concerns of stakeholders, both local and international, concerning the outbreak of the pandemic (Obeng-Odoom 2020; Adu-Gyamfi et al. 2021).

It became evident after a few months of the outbreak that even the most advanced economies with adequate medical infrastructure were heavily hit by the pandemic. Comparing Ghana, a state with fragile healthcare systems, with Spain and the USA that have scored higher in numbers of mortality and fatality, exacerbated the position that, indeed, everyone within the country (Ghana) would have died by June considering the spike in COVID-19 cases. While this was a reality, it also created a good sense of humour among the citizens. A post on tweeter read:

1000+ cases and Nana has lifted the lockdown, I think he wants the prophecy to come true.... “Se by June dee na obia awu.” (Boamah Silent 2020)

The Pallbearers and the Swedru Boys Humour

One group that gained fame during the period under study across the world was the Nana Otafrija Pallbearing and Waiting Services troupe. According to a reporter, this troupe had established and gained fame around 2017 following a discovery by BBC Africa (Lansah 2020). See figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3: Nana Otafrija Pallbearers Dancing with a Coffin



Source: Nana Otafrija Pallbearing & Waiting Services 2020

Figure 4: A Facebook Post on Nana Otafrija Pallbearers



Source: Benjamin Aidoo 2020

These pallbearers are identified by their skill in funeral procession using the coffin to perform various skills, including dancing. At the outbreak of

COVID-19, the pallbearers always appeared in Internet memes and videos to make fun (Nunoo 2020). This notwithstanding, most citizens posted their picture and video memes in order to showcase that “one’s body would be used to perform the skills, if she/he contracts the COVID and dies” (Nunoo 2020). To that extent, their appearance on social media during the epic moment sanctioned a form of warning to citizens of the country and across the world. In one post with their picture, the caption warned: “stay home or dance with us” (Nunoo 2020). Irrespective of that, their memes were added to edited videos in order to enhance the control and reduction of stress.

The incongruity in dancing with the pallbearers as a corpse is clear. They will dance with a body and receive remunerations for their services rendered, but the corpse certainly will not enjoy the dance. Associating the pallbearers dancing with the corpse and the corpse enjoying such a dance is unexpected; a corpse is a corpse and has no feelings. Besides, there is humour embedded in the name “Otafrija” which literarily means he who eats fire. The implication is that the group is not afraid of death and hence their ability to perform all manners of dancing skills with the coffin. However, it is the Ghanaian citizenry who need to be afraid of the COVID-19 pandemic and death; if citizens would not take precautions and allow themselves to be decimated by the pandemic, the pallbearers would not be afraid to dance with their coffins before burial. Thus the name has an inbuilt humour as well as an indirect warning to the people of Ghana.

Also of seminal importance was one video made in Swedru in the Central Region of Ghana. In the video, there were six males issuing warnings about the Coronavirus, with one issuing his warning in a Chinese dialect. Specifically, they said:

Coronavirus—you this disease, we warned you never to come to Ghana but you would not listen; you have manoeuvred your way into the country. We see you appear obstinate ... We have heard you are planning to embark on a journey to Cape Coast after which you would trek towards Swedru. But woe betides you if you come to Swedru. In fact, if you come into the town of Swedru, you would not like what will be meted to you.

... Then comes the fake Mandarin speaker, who also spewed his warning in a dialect that simulates Mandarin.

In all the data above, the humour appears very obvious as they have the potential to lead observers to laugh (Carrell 2008; Ford et al. 2016). The data also signifies that citizens in the country coined ways to improve upon their humorous tendencies and those of others amidst the stress. As reported above in the discourse on humour, the creation of funny scenes aids the eradication and control of stress (Dean 1997; Ford et al. 2016; Martin 2019). Similarly, in Ghana, these humorous tendencies were used as a means to neutralise stress, depression and tension that accompanied the pandemic. With regard to the humour on “By June everyone would have died,” while the statement had the proclivity to heighten the humour of citizens as a means of releasing stress and tension, it equally could have the adverse psychological impact on citizens. Within the literature about bad news, it is suggested that breaking and spreading bad news, including “By June everyone would have died,” has the proclivity to affect individual’s mental well-being (Sparks et al. 2007; Gallagher et al. 2010). Bad news breeds uncertainty, loss of hope, anxiety and extreme emotional reactions with the ability of worsening the cases of people with chronic diseases (Sparks et al. 2007; Gallagher et al. 2010).

The Nose Mask Humour

In Ghana, knowledge about the potential danger and nature of the spread of COVID-19 diseases prompted the government to make various reforms and to formulate policies in order to stem the burden of COVID-19 in the country (Frimpong 2020; Ministry of Health 2020). Among the measures that gained currency were the implementation of social distancing protocols, a closure of schools and borders, hygienic protocols and a partial lockdown in certain cities that were considered hotspots of the virus (Ministry of Health 2020).

Also, of seminal importance was the wearing of nose masks. Nose masks, according to experts, serve as a means of controlling and preventing the spread of respiratory droplets produced by symptomatic or asymptomatic victims (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control 2020). With this in mind, the government of Ghana announced on 14 June 2020 that the wearing of nose masks be made compulsory in public places (Mbewa 2020). This arrangement incriminated those who failed to wear such a mask

in public places with punishments including a fine and a jail of about ten years (Mbewa 2020). In order to skip the various punishments and to protect themselves against the virus, Ghanaians, aside from a few obstinate ones, welcomed the wearing of face and nose masks as a novelty against the virus.

Apart from surgical masks, the literature reports that local masks produced with fabrics could equally be useful as they proved worthy during the outbreak of SARS in 2003 (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control 2020). In Ghana, the citizens started using local fabrics to sew indigenous face masks with various designs. Consequently, varieties of nose masks were spotted in Ghana during the outbreak of the pandemic. Some people in the country abused the wearing of nose masks in order to appeal to the sense of humour of Ghanaians and the world. Humour associated with the nose mask has been illustrated in the four pictures below (see figures 5–8).

Figure 5: A Man Overprotecting Himself with Nose Masks



Source: Gershon Mortey 2020

Figure 6: Plastic Bottle as Nose Mask



Source: Zim Eye 2020

Figure 7: Plantain Leaf as Nose Mask



Source: Eric Kneedler 2020

Figure 8: A Man in a Mini Nose Mask



Source: Highest Bryt 2020

In the figures above we have illustrated how nose masks were used locally. In figure 5, a man is seen overprotecting himself with more than five nose masks covering the face and the knees. In the sixth and seventh figures, people are seen using a plastic bottle and a plantain leaf respectively as nose masks. The nose mask that appears in figure 8 was termed locally as a “mini-nose mask.”

Humour associated with mask is not a neoteric event. The literature reports that mask humour first emerged during the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic (Foss 2020). As public health experts advised the public to put on masks, people started making fun of what scholars term a “flu mask” (Foss 2020). In Ghana, mask humour diffused among the populace at the outbreak of the virus. We infer from the pictures above that they can influence the sense of humour of people from two dimensions: incongruity and relief.

From the relief theory on humour, it can be argued that people who came across these pictures developed humorous tendencies despite the anxieties created by the pandemic. To this extent, they laughed in order to release stress and to further lessen the burden of COVID-19. From the incongruity dimension too, the pictures appear much surprising. As reported by Mortey (2020), a sight of the pictures appears funny. They appear funny because of the materials from which the masks were made and the manner in which the masks were worn. From the pictures, it is clear that some of the masks cannot offer any protection because of the materials they are made of or because of the manner in which they have been worn, thus raising questions on why they are worn at all. This is what is incongruous with them. On this note, we argue that audiences were astonished to have come across the picture in question.

Aside from the pictorial presentations that sparked the humour of individuals, people made funny posts on social media concerning the use of face or nose masks. Significantly, a Twitter user posted that: “Wearing a face mask means I don’t have to smile... bless u COVID, a true feminist ally” (Bologna 2020). Another Twitter user posted that: “this is interesting--you know how your breath smells like diarrhea when your mask is on? It’s because your breath smells like diarrhea” (Bologna 2020).

An informant argued that “in the past, animals and especially dogs, used to be covered by masks, when they were going to be killed; at the outbreak of this disease, however, it has turned to be man’s turn to follow suit” (Participant 1). As Ghanaians had always found ways of making themselves happy amidst difficult situations, most citizens who utilised social media searched for the humorous posts, liked them, and shared these. In this context, the two theories under review fit the discourse. While observers may have laughed to release tension, posts like the above spark the humorous tendencies among individuals because they are surprised about what they see on the various social media outlets.

Conclusion

The outbreak of COVID-19 has generated tensions among various stakeholders across the globe. Significantly, apart from its impact on the economy, the pandemic has also led to relevant consequences at the individual level. The current study has paid attention to the importance of humour in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the discourse, we have indicated

that Ghanaians have always developed means by which they create fun during tensed moments in order to boost their mental health. In Ghana, this includes the creation of humourous tendencies to control the anxiety and tension created by the virus and the pandemic generally.

As the number of reported cases soared to unexpected levels, the tension of Ghanaians heightened with most of the citizens experiencing various levels of psychological impact. Notwithstanding, several individuals found means to create humour. Our study has shown that various humourous events revolved around the variety of nose and/or facemasks, terminologies created during the pandemic and various social media posts. In the study, attention has been paid to the level to which these moments influenced the sense of humour of Ghanaians and the world at large. As humour appears intuitive, some people were compelled to neutralise tension with posts that flooded social media in order to raise their sense of humour mainly because they were surprised at what they saw, watched or heard and/or they sought to release stress.

It is imperative to highlight that humour associated with the pallbearing activities did not only become popular in Ghana but gained international credence during the outbreak of COVID-19. In memes and sign posts across Europe and the rest of the world, their activities of carrying coffins in order to dance were imitated in various ways to create humour. Based on the above, we argue that stakeholders across the world have used the pallbearing activities as strategies and means to reduce the levels of psychological and emotional impact which accompanied the pandemic by creating humourous activities.

From both earlier and the current literature, it is evident that humour and laughter, while releasing stress, have the proclivity to also contribute to the psychological well-being of individuals. While the reality of the pandemic has become very apparent to Ghanaians, attention to the various protocols enlisted by the Ghana Health Service and the Government of Ghana has decreased. In contemporary times, most Ghanaians rarely wear nose masks in public spaces, signifying a decline in the fear towards the COVID-19 virus. It could also mean a reduction due to the proper observance of other related COVID protocols. Thus, partially, as a result of the creation of humour among Ghanaians, the tension associated with the infection can be argued to have decreased with time.

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