

When AI Meets Political Satire: Meme Culture, Narrative Contestation and Public Perception in Nigeria's Digital Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed contemporary political communication by expanding the production and circulation of synthetic visual contents, memes, and digitally mediated narratives. While existing scholarship has largely focused on the implications of AI for misinformation, manipulation, and electoral politics, less attention has been devoted to its role in political satire, citizen participation, and narrative contestation, particularly within African digital publics. This study examined the controversy that followed remarks by Nigeria's First Lady, Senator Oluremi Tinubu, in June 2026 regarding low-capital enterprises such as *akara* frying, roasted corn vending, and *kuli-kuli* production as pathways to economic empowerment. The subsequent circulation of AI-generated *Iya Alakara* imagery, memes, parody videos, and satirical commentaries transformed the remarks into a significant site of political debate within Nigeria's digital public sphere.

Drawing on Narrative Paradigm Theory, the study employed a qualitative digital ethnographic approach that combined netnography, qualitative content analysis, and visual meme analysis. Data were derived from publicly accessible discussions on X, Facebook, TikTok, Reddit, online news reports, memes, and AI-generated visual contents circulated between June and July 2026. Findings indicated that digital audiences reinterpreted the official entrepreneurship narrative through the lens of lived economic realities, reframing it as a broader discourse on inflation, unemployment, governance, political accountability, and social inequality. The study further demonstrated that AI-generated political imagery functions as a contested symbolic resource rather than a straightforward instrument of persuasion. By appropriating, remixing, and satirizing official narratives, citizens actively participated in the production of alternative political meanings. The paper further argued that the convergence of generative AI, meme culture, and participatory digital media is reshaping political communication in Nigeria by decentralizing narrative authority and expanding opportunities for citizen-led counter-discourse within networked publics.

Keywords: Generative Artificial Intelligence, Memes, Politics, Digital Satire, Political Communication, Narrative Paradigm Theory, Digital Public Sphere

INTRODUCTION

The rapid diffusion of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has fundamentally altered the architecture of political communication across the world. Advances in machine learning and synthetic media technologies now enable the production of realistic images, videos, audio recordings, and textual contents capable of influencing public perception, shaping political discourse, and redefining the relationship between political actors and citizens. Early debates surrounding AI in politics focused primarily on misinformation, deepfakes, and algorithmic manipulation (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2017). The growing integration

of AI into political communication coincides with broader transformations in the digital media environment. The rise of social media platforms has disrupted traditional models of political communication in which governments, political parties, and mainstream media organizations exercised substantial control over the production and dissemination of political information. In contemporary networked societies, political communication occurs within highly interactive media ecosystems where citizens actively create, remix, interpret, and contest political narratives. Digital platforms have consequently become arenas of continuous symbolic struggle in which official accounts compete with citizen-generated interpretations for visibility, legitimacy, and public acceptance (Chadwick, 2017; Jungherr, 2023).

This transformation is particularly significant in the context of contemporary Africa, where expanding internet penetration, smartphone adoption, and social media use have fostered new forms of digital citizenship and political participation. Scholars increasingly argued that African digital publics have emerged as important sites for political deliberation, civic engagement, and the negotiation of public meanings (Wasserman, 2020; Bosch, 2023). Citizens across the continent routinely employ digital platforms to scrutinize political actors, challenge dominant narratives, mobilize collective action, and articulate alternative interpretations of political events. Consequently, digital media technologies have become central to the evolving dynamics of state-society relations.

Within these environments, memes have emerged as particularly influential instruments of political communication. Far from being mere expressions of online humour, political memes function as compressed narratives capable of communicating complex social and political critiques through visual symbolism, parody, and satire (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2018). Their communicative effectiveness is derived from their accessibility, shareability, and capacity to condense collective experiences into highly recognizable cultural forms. Increasingly, the development of generative AI tools has expanded the possibilities of meme production by enabling the rapid creation of synthetic visual contents that can be appropriated and modified by ordinary users. As a result, AI-generated imagery now occupies an increasingly important position within contemporary meme culture and digital political participation.

Nigeria presents a compelling context for examining these developments. As Africa's most populous country and one of the continent's largest digital markets, Nigeria possesses a vibrant and highly participatory digital culture in which political debates frequently unfold across social media platforms. Digital spaces have become important avenues for public deliberation, electoral engagement, policy discussions, and citizen criticism of political authority. The increasing adoption of AI-generated content within these environments introduces new questions concerning narrative control, political legitimacy, public trust, and citizen participation.

A particularly illuminating example emerged in June 2026 following remarks by Nigeria's First Lady, Senator Oluremi Tinubu, during discussions on government empowerment initiatives. While outlining programmes designed to support vulnerable populations through grants and livelihood interventions, she cited small-scale enterprises such as *akara* (beans cake) frying, roasted corn vending, and *kuli-kuli* (groundnuts flakes) production as examples of businesses requiring relatively little start-up capital. Although the remarks were presented within the context of entrepreneurship and economic self-reliance, they quickly generated extensive public debate across digital platforms.

For many Nigerians, the comments resonated with broader concerns regarding inflation, unemployment, declining purchasing power, and growing economic insecurity. Critics interpreted the remarks as evidence of a widening disconnection between political elites and ordinary citizens confronting difficult economic realities. Others defended the comments as practical illustrations of grassroots entrepreneurship and self-employment opportunities. What began as a policy-related statement soon evolved into a highly visible national conversation concerning economic development, governance, social inequality, and political accountability.

The controversy acquired additional significance when it migrated from conventional news reporting into Nigeria's digital public sphere. Social media users rapidly transformed the remarks into a symbolic political narrative through the creation of memes, parody videos, satirical commentaries, and AI-generated images. The publication of an AI-generated *Iya Alakara* (beans cake maker) image by the President Bola Ahmed Tinubu Media Centre in July 2026 further intensified online reactions, generating a new wave of humour, criticism,

reinterpretation, and political commentary. Rather than reinforcing the original entrepreneurship narrative, the image became a focal point for competing interpretations regarding governance, economic hardship, and public perception.

The controversy highlights an important transformation in contemporary political communication. The issue was no longer merely about entrepreneurship or economic empowerment. Instead, it evolved into a struggle over political meaning in which official narratives were challenged, reinterpreted, and reconstructed by networked citizens through digital participation. The controversy, therefore, offers an opportunity to examine how AI-generated imagery, meme culture, and participatory media practices intersect to shape public understandings of political events.

Against this backdrop, this paper investigated how Senator Oluremi Tinubu's remarks and the subsequent circulation of AI-generated imagery were interpreted, contested, and reconstructed within Nigeria's networked public sphere. Specifically, the study examined the role of generative AI in political visual communication, exploring how memes function as instruments of political participation and symbolic resistance, and analysed how digital audiences negotiate political meanings in contexts characterized by economic uncertainty and declining institutional trust.

Despite these advances, there remains limited empirical research on how generative AI, political memes and everyday satire interact within an African political controversy that is not primarily an election campaign or organised protest. The Nigerian Iya Alakara controversy offers an opportunity to address this gap by examining how an official political narrative was transformed through AI-generated imagery, meme production, humour and citizen counter-narratives. The study therefore contributes to the literature by connecting synthetic media research with African meme politics, digital activism and narrative contestation.

The reviewed literature reveals four interconnected developments. First, synthetic political media can influence credibility, memory and political evaluation, but its effects vary by plausibility, modality and audience characteristics. Second, memes are established forms of political expression through which citizens compress complex grievances into culturally recognisable narratives. Third, African digital activism demonstrates that networked publics can challenge institutional narratives while remaining constrained by political and technological structures. Fourth, algorithmic recommendation increasingly affects the visibility and composition of political information environments.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The convergence of algorithmic distribution and generative AI also raises a new question: whether AI lowers the production costs of political communication while platform systems lower the distribution costs. Chang et al. (2026) provide evidence that AI-generated memes can attract enhanced engagement when combined with human curation. This supports a socio-technical interpretation in which AI is neither an autonomous political actor nor merely a neutral production tool. Instead, it forms part of a chain involving prompting, selection, editing, meme conventions, audience interpretation and algorithmic distribution.

A further gap concerns the relationship between political expression and algorithmic visibility. Recent evidence indicates that the reach of political content cannot be attributed entirely to user preferences. Ibrahim et al. (2026) show that TikTok's recommendation system produced asymmetric partisan exposure during the 2024 U.S. election. Their audit design is especially instructive methodologically because it separates controlled exposure from subsequent recommendations and explicitly measures co-partisan and cross-partisan content. Although the present study does not claim to measure algorithmic causation, this literature suggests that the circulation of Nigerian political memes should be interpreted with awareness that platform ranking, engagement incentives and recommendation systems can affect which narratives become prominent.

Algorithmic Influence and the Visibility of Political Narratives

The present study extends this literature by shifting attention from organised protest to everyday participatory satire. Unlike hashtag activism, which often seeks explicit mobilisation, memes and AI-generated parody may

engage citizens through humour, ridicule and symbolic inversion. Their political significance therefore lies partly in lowering the threshold for participation. Users who may not join a formal campaign or protest can nevertheless participate in political discourse by producing or circulating a humorous image.

The literature on African digital activism also shows that social media can support counter-narratives while facing important structural constraints. Idowu (2023) examined digital activism and social change in Africa and highlighted the motivations, outcomes and constraints associated with online political engagement. In Nigeria, Dambo et al. (2022) found that #EndSARS provided an important arena for youth expression and mobilisation but also revealed limitations imposed by the wider political environment. Related work by Inobemhe and Santas (2022) and by research on the Nigerian Twitterscape shows how digital platforms facilitated mobilisation, storytelling, coordination and transnational solidarity during #EndSARS. These studies are relevant to the present case because they demonstrate a recurring pattern in Nigerian digital politics: citizens appropriate networked media to transform individual grievances into collective narratives.

Digital Activism, Counter-Narratives and African Digital Publics

African research provides particularly relevant evidence. John and Tomere (2022) compared political memes from Nigeria and South Africa and found that the memes used satire and multimodal symbolism to condemn corruption and represent negative ideological attributes of political actors. Their cross-national comparison is important because it demonstrates that political memes can operate similarly as instruments of elite criticism while remaining embedded in different national political contexts. Elewosi and Zompetti (2025) similarly examined Ghanaian online memetic discourse and showed how humour, satire, incongruity and indigenous artistic techniques can transform memes into forms of public argument. These African studies support the present argument that meme politics should be interpreted through local cultural meanings and political grievances rather than through universal assumptions about humour.

Political memes are increasingly treated as substantive forms of political expression rather than peripheral online humour. Johann (2022), using an online survey of 482 political meme users, found that political meme use was associated with political interest, social-media prosumption, motivations for political engagement and internal political efficacy. This suggests that meme production can be connected to broader orientations toward political participation. Walters et al. (2023), analysing widely circulated Facebook memes concerning critical race theory, further demonstrated that political memes can construct competing forms of knowledge through recurring rhetorical and visual strategies. Their findings show that memes should be analysed as meaning-making practices rather than simply as containers of misinformation.

Political Memes, Satire and Participatory Meaning-Making

More recent research shifts attention from deepfakes as misinformation to generative AI as a participatory production technology. Chang et al. (2026), analysing 239,526 Instagram images from the 2024 U.S. presidential election, found that meme format was a stronger predictor of engagement than AI generation alone, while AI-generated memes produced a significant interaction effect when combined with human curation. The finding closely resonates with the present case: the political significance of the Iya Alakara imagery may lie less in its synthetic status by itself than in how users appropriate, remix and embed it within familiar meme conventions.

Research on political sharing further indicates that audience behaviour matters. In an Indian study of 310 respondents, examining motivations for sharing political deepfake videos, the authors found that political brand hate and moral consciousness were relevant to sharing intentions (2023). This is particularly useful for the Nigerian case because it suggests that circulation cannot be explained solely by the technological quality of synthetic content; affective and political motivations can also determine whether users reproduce and amplify it. Earlier experimental work by Hameleers et al. (2022), using 1,244 participants in the Netherlands, likewise found that deepfakes were not more persuasive than textual disinformation and that their effects depended on prior agreement and social embedding.

Audience discernment is also modality-dependent. Groh et al. (2024), across five preregistered randomized experiments involving 2,215 participants, found that audio-visual information could facilitate detection of political speech deepfakes compared with text alone, while synthetic speech generated with state-of-the-art text-to-speech systems was more difficult to distinguish from authentic speech. These results reinforce the importance of analysing not only whether political content is AI-generated but also how its visual and auditory cues interact with audience expectations and prior beliefs.

Generative AI has expanded political communication beyond the manipulation of existing media to the rapid production of new images, audio, video and text. Recent empirical studies complicate the assumption that synthetic political content is uniformly persuasive. Hameleers, van der Meer, and Dobber (2024), using a comparative experiment in the United States and the Netherlands ($N = 1,187$), found that the effects of political deepfakes varied with the plausibility and ideological positioning of the manipulated content. Plausible manipulations could appear more credible, while implausible manipulations could still delegitimize political actors. Similarly, Murphy et al. (2025) experimentally compared homemade political deepfakes with textual and synthetic-audio misinformation ($N = 443$). Deepfakes produced false memories and, in some conditions, reduced voting intention, but they were not consistently more effective than simple text. These findings caution against technological determinism and support examining how audiences interpret synthetic content within particular political and cultural contexts.

Generative AI and Synthetic Political Communication

The implication is that political meaning should be understood as emerging from the interaction of human agency, platform affordances and algorithmic selection. This is especially relevant to memes and AI-generated images, whose circulation depends on recommendation, engagement and remixing. The present study therefore treats the Nigerian digital public sphere not as a neutral container of political expression but as a socio-technical environment in which users, political actors and platforms jointly influence what becomes visible, repeatable and culturally salient.

Political communication now operates through a hybrid and increasingly platformed media system in which political institutions, journalists, influencers, ordinary users, and algorithmic recommendation systems interact. The hybrid media perspective remains useful because political narratives move across institutional and user-generated media rather than remaining within a single channel. Recent empirical work, however, suggests that platform architecture and automated ranking must be treated as part of the communication environment itself. Ibrahim et al. (2026), for example, conducted 323 controlled TikTok audit experiments during the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign and analysed more than 280,000 recommendations. They found systematic asymmetries in partisan exposure that persisted after adjustment for observable engagement measures. The study is important for the present research because it demonstrates that political visibility is shaped not only by what users create or share but also by the infrastructures through which content is recommended.

Political Communication in Hybrid and Platformed Media Systems

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Narrative Paradigm Theory

This study is anchored in Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm Theory (1984, 1987), one of the most influential approaches for understanding communication as a process of storytelling and meaning-making. Fisher challenged the conventional rational-world paradigm which assumes that individuals evaluate messages primarily through logic, empirical evidence, and formal argumentation. Instead, he argued that human beings are essentially *homo narrans*—storytelling beings who make sense of social reality through narratives. From this perspective, political communication is not merely the transmission of information but the construction and circulation of stories that compete for public acceptance.

At the centre of the theory are the concepts of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. Narrative coherence is concerned with the internal consistency of a story. A narrative is considered coherent when its elements fit

together in a plausible and understandable manner. Narrative fidelity, on the other hand, refers to the degree to which a narrative corresponds with the values, experiences, and social realities of its audience. Fisher (1987) further argued that individuals judge narratives not only according to whether they are logically consistent but also according to whether they “ring true” in relation to their lived experiences.

Within networked communication systems, official narratives rarely remain uncontested. Citizens actively reinterpret, remix, and challenge political messages through memes, satire, parody videos, hashtags, visual content, and user-generated commentary. These communicative practices create alternative narratives that compete directly with institutional accounts of political events. Digital platforms therefore function as sites of continuous narrative negotiation in which political meanings are collectively produced rather than unilaterally imposed.

The controversy surrounding the First Lady's remarks and the subsequent circulation of the AI-generated *Iya Alakara* image provides a particularly useful context for applying Narrative Paradigm Theory. The official narrative promoted entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and grassroots economic empowerment. Through references to small-scale enterprises such as *akara* frying, roasted corn vending, and *kuli-kuli* production, the message sought to communicate those economic opportunities remained accessible despite broader economic challenges. The subsequent AI-generated image reinforced this narrative by visually representing the First Lady as a symbolic advocate of entrepreneurship and community-based economic activity.

However, the public response revealed a profound contestation of narrative fidelity. While the official narrative may have possessed internal coherence, many citizens evaluated it against their everyday experiences of inflation, unemployment, declining purchasing power, and economic insecurity. For significant segments of the online publics, the narrative failed to correspond with prevailing socio-economic realities. Consequently, users generated alternative interpretations through memes, parody videos, satirical commentaries, and AI-generated counter-images.

Viewed through the lens of Narrative Paradigm Theory, the controversy represents a struggle between institutional narratives and experiential narratives. Institutional narratives were advanced by political actors seeking to frame entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic empowerment. Experiential narratives emerged from citizens drawing upon personal experiences of economic hardship and social precarity. The conflict between these competing narratives ultimately shaped public reactions to both the original remarks and the AI-generated imagery.

The emergence of AI-generated political imagery further enhances the applicability of the theory. Unlike conventional political communication, synthetic visual contents can condense complex political debates into highly symbolic representations capable of generating immediate emotional and interpretive responses. The *Iya Alakara* image therefore functioned not merely as a visual illustration but as a political narrative in symbolic form. Once circulated within digital environments, it became available for reinterpretation, parody, and contestation by networked audiences.

Narrative Paradigm Theory therefore provide a useful framework for understanding why digital audiences appropriated and transformed the image through meme culture. Rather than acting as passive recipients of political communication, citizens became active co-authors of political meaning. Through humour, satire, visual remixing, and digital storytelling, they generated counter-narratives that challenged official interpretations and introduced alternative understandings into public discourse.

Methodological Summary

Only publicly accessible material was analysed. Usernames and unnecessary personal identifiers were removed from quotations and screenshots unless the account is an official institutional or public-figure account and identification is necessary to establish provenance. Because memes and screenshots can be searchable, the authors should consider paraphrasing ordinary users' comments and obtaining additional ethical approval where institutional policy requires it. The analysis also distinguishes between observing public discourse and claiming that individual users intended a particular political effect.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, a documented coding framework, an audit trail, iterative comparison of cases, and negative-case attention. Negative cases included supportive or neutral interpretations of the entrepreneurship narrative so that the analysis did not assume universal opposition. A reflexive memo was maintained to record analytic decisions and assumptions about humour, politics and AI-generated imagery. If more than one researcher codes the corpus, a subset should be independently coded and disagreements discussed before finalising the codebook. Where intercoder agreement is calculated, the statistic and procedure should be reported rather than using agreement as a substitute for interpretive analysis.

Trustworthiness, Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

Cross-platform comparison was then used to determine which themes recurred across platforms and which appeared platform-specific. The analysis did not treat frequency as equivalent to importance. Instead, recurrence, symbolic richness, narrative centrality and evidence of reinterpretation were considered when determining the significance of a theme. Where visible engagement metrics were used, they were treated descriptively rather than as measures of persuasion or public opinion.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis: familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Thematic analysis was supplemented by multimodal visual analysis because the meaning of memes cannot be adequately captured by textual coding alone. For each visual artifact, the analysis considered denotation (what is represented), connotation (what the representation implies), intertextual reference (what cultural or political material it invokes), affective framing, and the relationship between image and caption.

Analytical Framework

For transparency, each retained artifact should receive an anonymised study ID and be recorded in a data log containing platform, date, URL or platform identifier where ethically and technically permissible, format, search term, inclusion decision, primary codes and analytic memo. For screenshots or downloaded media, the log should record the date of capture and file name. Private accounts, personal contact information and other unnecessary identifying information should not be reproduced in the manuscript.

AI involvement was coded into three categories: explicit AI-generated content where the source or accompanying text identified AI production; apparent AI-generated content where visual evidence strongly suggested synthesis but provenance could not be independently established; and non-AI content. The second category should be interpreted cautiously and should never be presented as verified AI generation. Visual coding distinguished symbolic inversion, role reversal, exaggeration, juxtaposition, parody, textual overlay and economic symbolism. Narrative coding distinguished the official entrepreneurship frame from experiential counter-narratives and hybrid or supportive interpretations.

A structured codebook was developed before final thematic interpretation. First-cycle coding combined deductive codes derived from the research objectives and Narrative Paradigm Theory with inductive codes emerging from the data. Each artifact was coded for platform, date, format, political target, dominant issue, narrative position, emotional tone, humour/satire, AI involvement, visual strategy, counter-narrative function and engagement indicators where visible. A second cycle grouped related codes into broader themes.

Coding Procedure

Sampling proceeded iteratively across platforms. Initial keyword searches were used to identify high-relevance artifacts, followed by snowball identification of recurring hashtags, meme templates, phrases and visual motifs. Collection continued until additional material produced no substantively new interpretive categories within the sampled platform streams. Because qualitative saturation is difficult to demonstrate retrospectively from platform data, the revised study treats saturation as a criterion for thematic development rather than as a claim of statistical completeness.

Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich artifacts directly related to the case. The primary unit of analysis was the individual digital artifact: a post, comment, meme, AI-generated image, short video or

news item. Where a meme appeared in several materially different versions, each substantially altered version was treated as a separate artifact; identical reposts were treated as duplicates. Comments were analysed as independent units when they introduced a distinct interpretation rather than merely expressing agreement or repeating the original post.

Sampling and Unit of Analysis

To improve reproducibility, the corpus was defined using a source-by-keyword strategy. Searches were restricted to posts, comments, videos and images containing at least one of the following terms or their obvious variants: 'Iya Alakara', 'Oluremi Tinubu', 'First Lady', 'akara', 'roasted corn', 'kuli-kuli', 'AI-generated', and relevant hashtags directly connected to the controversy. Items were included when they (a) fell within the study period, (b) were publicly accessible, (c) directly referred to the controversy, and (d) contained substantive political, economic, satirical or visual commentary. Duplicate reposts, automated repetitions, spam, advertisements and material without substantive relevance were excluded.

Data were drawn from publicly accessible material on X, Facebook, TikTok and Reddit, together with online news reports and publicly circulated AI-generated images and memes. Platform selection was based on their relevance to the controversy and their different communicative affordances: X for rapid political commentary and reposting; Facebook for public posts and discussion threads; TikTok for short-form audiovisual satire; Reddit for threaded discussion; and online news sites for contextualising the chronology and institutional framing of the controversy.

Data Sources and Corpus Construction

The case examined the digital controversy surrounding Senator Oluremi Tinubu's June 2026 remarks about small-scale enterprises such as akara frying, roasted corn vending and kuli-kuli production, and the subsequent circulation of AI-generated Iya Alakara imagery. The study period was 26 June to 31 July 2026. The period was retained because it captures the initial public reaction, the rapid production of memes and parody, the emergence of the AI-generated image and the subsequent counter-narratives.

Study Setting and Period

The study is interpretive rather than representative. Consequently, the findings should be understood as an explanation of patterns within the selected digital controversy, not as estimates of the attitudes of all Nigerians or all social-media users. This distinction is important because public-platform data are shaped by platform participation, visibility algorithms, language, user demographics and unequal access to digital media.

The study employed a qualitative digital ethnographic design combining netnography, qualitative content analysis, and multimodal visual analysis. The design was selected because the research questions concern how political meanings were produced, circulated and contested through naturally occurring online interactions rather than estimating causal effects on a population. The three approaches were used in complementary ways: netnography provided contextual understanding of platform practices; qualitative content analysis identified recurring themes in textual and audiovisual materials; and visual analysis examined symbolism, composition, humour, parody and remixing in memes and AI-generated images.

Research Design

Methodology

Table 1. Multimodal coding framework used for analysis.

Coding dimension	Operational definition	Illustrative indicators
Platform/source	Origin of artifact	X, Facebook, TikTok, Reddit, online news
Format	Primary media form	Text post/comment, meme, AI image, short video, news report

Narrative position	Relationship to official entrepreneurship frame	Supportive, critical/counter-narrative, mixed/ambivalent
Political target	Actor or institution represented	First Lady, political elite, government, public institutions
Issue frame	Principal problem or topic	Entrepreneurship, inflation, unemployment, cost of living, accountability
Humour/satire	Mode of comic political expression	Parody, irony, exaggeration, role reversal, ridicule
AI involvement	Evidence of synthetic production	Verified/explicit AI, apparent AI, non-AI
Visual strategy	Meaning-making device in image/video	Symbolic inversion, juxtaposition, textual overlay, impersonation
Affective tone	Dominant emotional orientation	Humour, anger, frustration, hope, ridicule, empathy
Counter-narrative function	How artifact contests or reframes official meaning	Experiential testimony, elite reversal, economic critique

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Analysis of the digital content revealed five interrelated themes that illuminate how networked audiences interpreted, challenged, and reconstructed the official narrative surrounding the controversy.

Theme One: Reframing Entrepreneurship as Economic Hardship

The most dominant theme is about the reinterpretation of the government's entrepreneurship narrative as a discourse on economic hardship and declining living conditions. Although the remarks were intended to highlight accessible livelihood opportunities, many users interpreted them as evidence of governmental detachment from prevailing economic realities.

Across platforms, contributors repeatedly contrasted the official narrative with lived experiences of inflation, unemployment, rising food prices, and declining purchasing power. Rather than viewing *akara* frying and related enterprises as examples of economic empowerment, many participants interpreted them as symbols of shrinking economic opportunities and declining national aspirations.

Equally, users did not evaluate the remarks solely as entrepreneurial advice. Instead, they treated them as symbolic indicators of governmental attitudes toward economic development and social welfare. As a result, the controversy rapidly transcended its original context and became embedded within broader discussions concerning economic management, governance, and public accountability.

From the perspective of Narrative Paradigm Theory, this finding suggest that narrative legitimacy in digital environments depends less on institutional authority than on perceived alignment with citizens' lived experiences. Where audiences perceive a disconnection between official narratives and everyday realities, narrative fidelity weakens, and alternative interpretations emerge.

Theme Two: AI-Generated Imagery as a Site of Narrative Contestation

Another finding is about the role of AI-generated imagery as a contested symbolic resource. The AI-generated *Iya Alakara* image became a focal point for competing interpretations regarding governance, leadership, and economic realities.

Supporters interpreted the image as a creative and humorous attempt to reinforce the entrepreneurship message. Critics, however, viewed it as evidence of governmental insensitivity to widespread economic challenges. Rather than consolidating public support, the image generated new opportunities for criticism, parody, and reinterpretation.

This finding indicates that AI-generated political imagery does not guarantee narrative control. Once circulated within networked environments, synthetic images become open to multiple interpretations and may acquire meanings that diverge substantially from the intentions of their creators.

The controversy therefore demonstrated that AI-generated visual communication functions not merely as a persuasive tool but as a site of symbolic struggle where competing political meanings are negotiated.

Theme Three: Memes as Instruments of Political Satire and Civic Critique

The analysis revealed the extensive use of memes as vehicles for political commentary, satire, and civic critique. Across platforms, users employed humour, parody, exaggeration, and symbolic inversion to challenge official narratives and articulate broader concerns regarding governance and economic conditions.

Three dominant categories of memes emerged from the dataset.

a. Professional Reversal Memes

A significant number of memes depicted professionals such as doctors, engineers, lecturers, lawyers, accountants, and pilots abandoning their occupations to engage in *akara* frying, corn roasting, or *kuli-kuli* production. The humour derived from the contrast between years of educational investment and the informal economic activities promoted within the public discourse. These representations symbolized anxieties surrounding graduate unemployment, underemployment, and declining economic opportunities. Through humour, users communicated concerns regarding the perceived inability of the economy to absorb skilled labour and reward professional expertise.

b. Political Leadership Memes

A second category portrayed political leaders, cabinet ministers, legislators, governors, and senior public officials as roadside traders. AI-generated images and edited photographs frequently placed political elites behind *akara* stands, roasting corn by the roadside, or selling local snacks in open markets.

The symbolic inversion embedded within these memes served as a critique of perceived elite detachment from ordinary citizens. By imagining political leaders occupying positions associated with economic precarity, users challenged existing power relations and questioned the adequacy of official responses to economic hardship.

c. National Economy Memes

A third category connected the controversy to wider concerns about inflation, poverty, and economic decline. These memes frequently combined references to *akara* and *kuli-kuli* with images of rising food prices, depreciating purchasing power, empty wallets, and distressed consumers.

The significance of these memes lies in their capacity to condense complex socio-economic concerns into highly accessible visual narratives. Rather than functioning as mere entertainment, the memes operated as compressed political stories through which citizens translated structural economic grievances into shareable forms of public commentary.

Consistent with the arguments advanced by Shifman (2014) and Milner (2018), this finding demonstrates that memes have evolved into important instruments of political communication capable of facilitating civic engagement, political critique, and collective meaning-making.

Theme Four: Emergence of Citizen Counter-Narratives

Another important finding is on the emergence of sophisticated counter-narratives that directly challenged the government's interpretation of the controversy. While official communication emphasized entrepreneurship, self-reliance, economic empowerment, and community-level enterprise, citizen-generated narratives focused on unemployment, rising living costs, declining purchasing power, economic insecurity, and political accountability.

Rather than merely rejecting the official message, users developed alternative explanations for the socio-economic conditions confronting ordinary Nigerians. These counter-narratives frequently incorporated

personal testimonies, experiential accounts, and everyday observations concerning employment, household finances, and economic survival.

A notable feature of these counter-narratives was their grounding in lived experience. Many contributors drew upon personal stories of prolonged job searches, business failures, rising household expenses, and difficulties meeting basic needs. Such accounts served as forms of experiential evidence through which citizens challenged institutional interpretations of economic reality.

This finding underscored the importance of narrative fidelity within digital political communication. Citizens appeared less concerned with the internal logic of the entrepreneurship narrative than with its perceived correspondence to their everyday experiences. Where a perceived gap existed between official representations and lived realities, alternative narratives emerged to challenge institutional accounts.

The proliferation of counter-narratives further illustrated how digital platforms facilitate the democratization of symbolic production. Networked citizens no longer merely consume political messages; they actively participate in constructing alternative interpretations of public events.

Theme Five: Humour as Participatory Political Engagement

The final theme highlights the role of humour as a mechanism of political participation. Across multiple platforms, humour functioned not simply as entertainment, but as a form of civic engagement through which citizens expressed dissatisfaction, negotiated political meanings, and participated in public discourse.

TikTok users, for example, produced short videos simulating *akara* frying, roadside trading, and corn roasting, while simultaneously commenting on unemployment, inflation, and economic hardship. Similar practices were observed across Facebook, X, and Reddit, where humorous content frequently served as a gateway to broader political discussions.

Humour has, however, lowered barriers to participation. Individuals who might not ordinarily engage in formal political debate were able to contribute through memes, jokes, parody videos, and satirical commentary. These communicative practices enabled users to participate in discussions concerning governance and public policy without relying on conventional political institutions. Humour emerged as a form of symbolic resistance that enabled citizens to critique authority, express collective frustrations, and negotiate alternative understandings of political reality.

Future studies could combine digital ethnography with computational content analysis, platform-level network analysis, audience interviews or survey experiments. Such designs would allow researchers to distinguish the production of counter-narratives from their reach, reception and effects on political attitudes. Comparative African studies could also examine whether similar AI-assisted meme practices occur during elections, protests and policy controversies in Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and other digital publics.

The study has several limitations. First, the purposive corpus is not statistically representative of Nigerian social-media users. Second, public-platform data do not provide reliable access to users' offline beliefs or intentions. Third, platform algorithms and moderation systems change over time, making retrospective reconstruction of visibility difficult. Fourth, the provenance of some AI-generated images cannot be independently verified; apparent AI generation should therefore be treated as an analytic category rather than a factual determination. Finally, the study focuses on one controversy and a short period. These limitations mean that the findings are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable.

LIMITATIONS

The study extends Narrative Paradigm Theory by showing that narrative fidelity in networked environments is negotiated through multimodal artifacts. A meme can challenge a formal political statement without offering a conventional counter-argument; its fidelity may instead derive from recognisable experiences, shared humour and symbolic resonance. The study also suggests that narrative authority should be examined alongside

platform affordances because the circulation of a compelling counter-narrative depends partly on the technological conditions under which it becomes visible.

Comparative Positioning of the Present Study

Globally, however, the role of AI introduces new conditions. Hameleers et al. (2024) and Murphy et al. (2025) show that synthetic political content can affect credibility, memory and political evaluations without necessarily being more persuasive than conventional misinformation. Chang et al. (2026) show that AI-generated memes can interact with meme format and human curation to increase engagement. Together, these findings suggest that the Nigerian case belongs to a wider transformation in which political communication is increasingly hybrid, multimodal and partly machine-assisted, while remaining strongly dependent on human interpretation and cultural context.

The case has broader significance when compared with evidence from other African and global contexts. In Nigeria, #EndSARS illustrates how digital networks can facilitate collective mobilisation and counter-narrative production (Dambo et al., 2022). In South Africa and Nigeria, political memes have been used to symbolically criticise political elites and corruption (John & Tomere, 2022). In Ghana, memetic discourse has similarly transformed satire and indigenous visual conventions into public argument (Elewosi & Zompetti, 2025). These studies indicate that humour, visual symbolism and networked participation are not marginal features of African political communication.

Comparative Significance Beyond Nigeria

This distinction is important. The current findings support the claim that citizens contested the official narrative, but they do not establish that the most visible memes represented the majority view of Nigerians. Public social-media data are not probability samples of the population. The discussion should therefore use terms such as 'online participants', 'sampled users' or 'digital contributors' rather than 'Nigerians' or 'the public' when referring to the empirical corpus.

The findings should also be interpreted against emerging evidence about algorithmic influence. Ibrahim et al. (2026) found systematic partisan asymmetries in TikTok recommendations during the 2024 U.S. election using controlled audit experiments. Their study demonstrates that platform recommendation can shape political exposure even when observable engagement variables are controlled. The present study does not measure recommendation effects and therefore cannot claim that algorithms caused the visibility of Iya Alakara memes. Nevertheless, the evidence supports a cautious conclusion: the prominence of a political meme is produced within a socio-technical system in which user creativity interacts with platform ranking and engagement mechanisms.

Algorithmic Visibility and the Limits of Narrative Control

The comparison suggests a broader African pattern: political memes frequently operate as low-cost forms of symbolic accountability. However, the present study also adds a distinctive AI dimension. Generative tools enable users to create more elaborate role reversals—such as depicting political elites in roadside trading environments—without the technical resources previously required for image manipulation. AI consequently lowers the production barrier while meme culture supplies the interpretive grammar through which the resulting images become politically meaningful.

The professional reversal, political leadership and national-economy memes identified in the study demonstrate the capacity of visual humour to compress structural grievances into culturally accessible narratives. This finding corresponds with Johann's (2022) evidence that meme use is associated with political interest, participatory media practices and motivations for political engagement. It also echoes John and Tomere's (2022) comparative study of Nigerian and South African political memes, which found that memes could represent corruption and negative attributes of political actors through satire and symbolism. Elewosi and Zompetti's (2025) Ghanaian study further demonstrates that indigenous cultural forms can transform humour and incongruity into public argument.

Memes, Humour and Participatory Political Expression

The present case adds an important participatory dimension. Rather than treating AI-generated imagery only as deceptive content, the study shows how synthetic images can become raw material for satire and counter-speech. This is closely aligned with Chang et al. (2026), who found that AI-generated images were especially consequential when integrated into meme formats through human curation. The Nigerian case therefore suggests that the political effect of generative AI depends on a chain of human and technological processes: production, selection, remixing, interpretation and circulation.

The second theme supports a more nuanced interpretation of AI-generated political communication. The Iya Alakara image did not produce a single predictable meaning. Supportive users could interpret it as creative reinforcement of grassroots entrepreneurship, while critics could read the same image as evidence of political insensitivity. This finding is compatible with experimental evidence showing that synthetic political media have heterogeneous effects. Hameleers et al. (2024) found that the plausibility of deepfake content affected credibility and delegitimization, while Murphy et al. (2025) showed that deepfakes can influence false memories and voting intentions but are not uniformly more powerful than textual misinformation. Groh et al. (2024) further demonstrate that audiences use multimodal cues in detecting political deepfakes.

AI Imagery as a Contested Rather Than Deterministic Technology

This finding is broadly consistent with African digital activism research. Idowu (2023) shows that African digital activism is shaped by motivations for accountability and social change but also by political and structural constraints. Research on #EndSARS similarly demonstrates how Nigerian users transformed individual experiences into collective narratives through networked communication (Dambo et al., 2022). The present case extends that literature from organised activism to everyday satire: citizens used humour and visual remixing to convert economic frustration into a politically legible counter-narrative.

The first theme is consistent with Fisher's concept of narrative fidelity. The official entrepreneurship frame was internally coherent: it presented small-scale enterprise as an accessible route to self-reliance. Yet many digital responses evaluated that frame against everyday experiences of economic insecurity. The resulting counter-narrative did not necessarily dispute that akara or similar businesses can provide income; rather, it challenged the adequacy of presenting such activities as a sufficient response to structural economic problems. This distinction strengthens the theoretical interpretation because it shows that narrative contestation may occur through reinterpretation rather than simple rejection.

Narrative Fidelity and the Reframing of Official Communication

The findings demonstrate that the Iya Alakara controversy was not simply a dispute over the meaning of a statement about entrepreneurship. It became a struggle over narrative legitimacy in which institutional framing, lived economic experience, humour, visual symbolism and platformed circulation interacted. The five themes indicate that audiences did not merely receive the entrepreneurship narrative; they translated it into a broader account of inflation, unemployment, purchasing power, inequality and political accountability.

CONCLUSION

The *Iya Alakara* controversy provides an important case study for understanding the evolving relationship between generative artificial intelligence, meme culture, political satire, and public perception within Nigeria's digital public sphere. What began as a policy-related statement concerning entrepreneurship evolved into a nationally contested discourse that transcended its original context and became a symbolic debate about economic hardship, governance, social inequality, and political accountability.

The study demonstrated that political communication in the digital age can no longer be understood as a linear process in which political actors produce messages that are passively consumed by audiences. Rather, political meanings are increasingly negotiated within networked communication environments characterized by participation, contestation, remixing, and continuous reinterpretation. Citizens do not merely receive political

messages; they actively reconstruct, challenge, and redistribute them through memes, satire, AI-generated imagery, parody videos, and other forms of digital expression.

Drawing on Narrative Paradigm Theory, the findings of this paper revealed that public acceptance of political narratives depends heavily on narrative fidelity. Audiences evaluate political messages according to their correspondence with lived realities rather than institutional intentions alone. Where a perceived disconnect emerges between official narratives and everyday experiences, alternative narratives are likely to arise and compete for legitimacy within the public sphere.

The study further demonstrated that AI-generated political imagery functions as a contested symbolic resource rather than a straightforward instrument of persuasion. Once circulated within participatory media environments, synthetic visual content becomes available for reinterpretation, parody, resistance, and political critique. Consequently, generative AI simultaneously expands the communicative capabilities of political actors and empowers citizens to engage in new forms of visual political storytelling.

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