

Semiotic Analysis of Protest Cartoons in Selected Nigerian Newspapers

Joel Olatunde Ayodabo

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities,

Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Nigeria.

Email: jo.ayodabo@acu.edu.ng/ayodabolatunde@yahoo.com

Phone Numbers: +2348033604983/+2348114580634

Ojo Akinleye Ayinuola

Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo.

Email: oa.ayinuola@acu.edu.ng/ayinuolaojo2@gmail.com

Phone Numbers: +2347069306990/+2347015204306

and

Faith Funmilayo Oluokun

Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo,

Oluokunfaith3@gmail.com

Phone Number: 08117679839

Abstract

Protest cartoons, as an artistic and journalistic form, offer powerful insights into the socio-political realities of Nigeria. Through humour, satire, and symbolism, they capture the frustrations of ordinary citizens, critique governance, and galvanise collective resistance. This paper investigates the semiotic resources of protest cartoons in selected Nigerian newspapers, focusing on how visual codes, compositional structures, and multimodal resources convey layered meanings within the country's protest discourse. Drawing on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) Social Semiotic Approach, the study interrogates the role of cartoons as both social commentary and instruments of resistance. Five protest cartoons were purposively selected from The Punch, Business Day, and Daily Trust newspapers between 2020 and 2024, covering the #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance protests. Findings reveal that Nigerian protest cartoons utilise symbolic imagery, caricature, textual anchorage, spatial arrangement, and culturally grounded metaphors to articulate corruption, poor governance, economic hardship, and citizens' resilience. By decoding these multimodal resources, the study situates cartoons as critical sites of protest in the media landscape, bridging elite discourse and popular struggles.

Keywords: *EndSARS, EndBadGovernance, Protest Cartoons, Nigerian Newspapers, Multimodality*

Introduction

Protest has long served as a means through which citizens resist unjust authority and demand accountability. Across civilisations, from ancient Egyptian workers' strikes to contemporary movements, protest has functioned both as political action and moral expression (Anderson, 2014).

In recent decades, protests have intensified globally, with citizens increasingly challenging state power (Klingemann, 1995). Scholars conceptualise protest variously as objection (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004), confrontation politics (Terchek, 1974), or a challenge to unjust authority (Anderson, 2014). This study adopts Terchek’s definition of protest as “public group activities utilising confrontation politics to apply stress on specific targets to influence public policy” because it captures both the organised and strategic nature of protest, aligning well with how protest cartoons operate as mediated, purposeful critiques of authority. Nigeria’s socio-political history is marked by a longstanding culture of protest from the 1929 Aba Women’s Riot to the “Ali Must Go” student movement of 1978, the #EndSARS demonstrations of 2020, and the nationwide #EndBadGovernance protests of 2024. Section 40 of the 1999 Constitution guarantees the right to peaceful assembly, reinforcing protest as a legitimate democratic practice. Alongside street demonstrations, mediated forms of dissent such as political cartoons have become influential tools of critique, offering visual commentary that captures the public mood, exposes abuse of power, and mobilises civic consciousness.

Cartoons occupy a central place in Nigerian media culture. Beyond humour, they function as social critique, alternative reportage, and political intervention (Oyedeji, 2013; Harrower, 2010). They distil complex realities into accessible imagery through exaggeration, symbolism, and caricature. Scholars describe protest cartoons as instruments of resistance (Agberia, 2000), blends of art and activism (Olaniyan, 2004), journalistic tools that condense ideology (Connors, 2007), and visual encapsulations of public opinion (Ganiyu, 2014). These perspectives show that protest cartoons are not merely satirical illustrations but multimodal artefacts that participate actively in political discourse.

This study investigates how protest cartoons visually construct protest narratives in Nigerian newspapers. It contributes to scholarship by investigating how multimodal resources, namely images, captions, symbols, and spatial organisation, encode ideological meanings within protest contexts, thereby extending research beyond humour analysis, digital memes, or general political cartoons. The study demonstrates how visual language becomes a strategic resource for articulating public grievances and shaping socio-political interpretation.

Statement of the Problem

Several studies have been carried out on newspaper discourse in Nigeria. Ogunrinde and Adegboye (2024), for example, employ Halliday’s metafunctions of language to compare multimodal stylistic

features of selected cartoons, revealing unique semiotic styles across newspapers. However, their reliance on linguistic analysis privileges verbal elements over visual ones, limiting the interpretation of visual meaning. Ako and Ottoh (2011) use Peirce's triadic model to study cartoons in *The Punch* and *The Guardian*, showing that a single sign may function as symbolic, iconic, or indexical depending on context. Yet, this approach emphasises sign typology while neglecting multimodal interaction and broader contextual factors. Similarly, Adeoti (2023) analyses humour in political cartoons, highlighting pragmatic acts such as informing, castigating, and ridiculing corruption and misgovernance. While insightful, this study does not situate cartoons within protest discourse or link pragmatic acts to collective mobilisation. These studies, though significant, predominantly adopt mono-modal approaches, overlooking how protest cartoons combine visual, verbal, and compositional resources to convey socio-political critique. This gap is critical, as protest cartoons, unlike general political cartoons, express the immediacy, urgency, and collective sentiments of social movements. The present study addresses this gap by adopting Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Multimodal Discourse Analysis* to examine the semiotic features of protest cartoons in selected Nigerian newspapers. It foregrounds visual resources, captions, semiotic signs, and symbolic representations to explore how these elements construct meaning, represent grievances, and communicate socio-political critique within the context of #EndSARS (2020) and EndBadGovernance (2024) protests.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study attempts to investigate the semiotic features of protest cartoons in selected Nigerian newspapers. The objectives of the study are to:

- i. To identify the semiotic resources in the protest cartoons in selected Nigerian newspapers; and
- ii. To analyse how these semiotic resources construct meaning within Nigeria's protest discourse.

Significance of the study

This study contributes to scholarship and practice by offering a nuanced understanding of how protest cartoons construct meaning through the interplay of visual and linguistic elements. By applying semiotic methods to selected Nigerian newspapers, this research extends research on language and visual communication, highlighting how satire, symbolism, and imagery operate as

powerful tools of socio-political discourse. For journalists and media practitioners, the study illuminates the role of cartoons beyond humour, showing how they educate, mobilise, and shape public awareness. Political analysts and policymakers gain a framework for interpreting the visual and textual cues that reflect and influence public opinion during periods of political contestation. Additionally, students and scholars in language, media, and political studies can benefit from the study's integrative approach, combining pragmatics, social semiotics, and collective action theory to analyse protest media.

The study's novelty lies in this interdisciplinary integration. Unlike prior research, which often examines protest cartoons from either a linguistic or visual perspective, this work combines these approaches to offer richer interpretative possibilities. By doing so, it advances methodological innovation, enhances the understanding of mediated protest, and demonstrates how cartoons function as vital instruments of civic engagement and socio-political critique in Nigeria.

Literature review on Protest Cartoons

Several studies have examined protest discourse across social, digital, and print media in Nigeria. Adeagbo (2025) explores multimodal resources such as colour, memes, short videos, and hashtags on TikTok and Facebook during the 2024 protests, showing how these modes amplify grievances and foster solidarity. While insightful, his study focuses almost exclusively on digital, user-generated content, overlooking traditional media forms such as editorial cartoons.

In a similar vein, Usman (2024) investigates editorial cartoons representing the #EndSARS protest, revealing how caricature, exaggeration, irony, and cultural allusions symbolically frame police excesses, government denial, and protesters' agency. Though this study foregrounds print media, it is limited to a single protest episode, leaving other socio-political movements unexplored.

Similarly, Okesola and Oyeboode (2023) analyse #EndSARS protest memes using appraisal theory and visual grammar, demonstrating how multimodal features convey evaluative meanings and emotional responses. Their work complements Adeagbo (2025) by highlighting pragmatic and semiotic functions in digital protest artefacts but similarly neglects institutional media like newspapers.

Together, these studies underscore the importance of multimodality in representing protest, yet reveal a clear gap: while digital memes and single-event cartoons have been studied, there is limited research on how traditional newspapers deploy multimodal and semiotic resources across multiple protest episodes. The present study addresses this gap by analysing protest cartoons from

both #EndSARS (2020) and EndBadGovernance (2024), examining how visual, verbal, and symbolic resources construct dissent, critique governance, and represent public frustration across socio-political contexts.

Theoretical framework

Social semiotics, building on Hallidayan principles, examines how meaning is created through culturally shaped semiotic resources. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) reformulate Halliday's metafunctions into representational, interactive, and compositional meanings for the analysis of images. Representational meaning encompasses both narrative and conceptual structures. Narrative representations are dynamic and include processes such as actions, vectors, gestures, and interactions. In contrast, conceptual representations are more static, involving classification, symbolism, and attributes. Interactive meaning refers to how images engage viewers and is constructed through three key dimensions: contact (whether the image demands or offers interaction), social distance (ranging from intimate to impersonal), and attitude (reflecting degrees of involvement, power, or detachment). Compositional meaning, on the other hand, is realised through systems such as information value (e.g., left/right or top/bottom positioning), salience (achieved via elements like size, colour, and focus), and framing (which connects or separates components of the image). As Jewitt and Oyama (2001) further observe, images like language derive meaning from the interplay of their constituent elements; the meaning does not lie in individual parts, but in their integration within a coherent visual structure. Guided by this framework, the present study investigates the semiotic features of protest cartoons as visually communicated in selected Nigerian newspapers from the #EndSARS (2020) and #EndBadGovernance (2024) protests.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design suitable for exploring meaning-making in visual texts. The population comprises protest-themed editorial cartoons published between 2020 and 2024 in four national newspapers: Daily Trust, The Punch, Business Day, and Nigerian Tribune. These outlets were selected based on national reach, editorial influence, and consistent use of political cartoons during protest periods. From an initial corpus of 50 protest-related cartoons (25 from #EndSARS and 25 from #EndBadGovernance contexts), five were purposively selected for detailed analysis. Selection criteria included thematic relevance, clarity of protest framing,

presence of rich semiotic elements, and representativeness of major socio-political concerns. The analysis follows Kress and van Leeuwen's three metafunctions. Each cartoon is analysed through its visual structures of representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning in multimodal discourse analysis. Textual components such as captions, slogans, and labels are integrated into the analysis to account for multimodal interaction. The data are to be subjected to semiotic analysis, the selected sample of visual texts are laid out and sequentially numbered as (e.g., Datum 1, Datum 2 ... Datum 15) and so forth, for ease of reference.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

Datum 1: HERE LIES SARS (Daily Trust, 15th October, 2020)



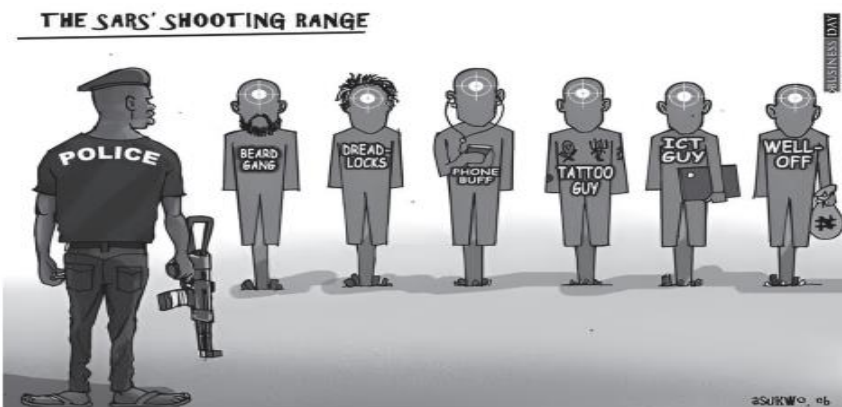
The cartoon depicts a young figure standing beside a tomb marked “HERE LIES SARS 1992–2020.” The grave, shovel, and epitaph serve as symbolic resources framing SARS as an institution deserving burial. The youth represent the collective body of Nigerian protesters performing a symbolic closure of state violence. The tomb functions as the goal of the represented action. The youth’s downward gaze constructs an offer rather than a demand, inviting viewers to witness communal grief. The slight low-angle presentation of the youth confers subtle agency and moral authority, positioning protesters as active agents of accountability. Dark tones evoke mourning, while the central placement of the tomb foregrounds the finality of SARS’s dissolution. The epitaph’s bold typography serves as an anchorage that reinforces the metaphor of institutional death. Framing is tight, focusing attention on the symbolic act of burial.

Datum 2: CNN DARES FG, RELEASES SECOND LEKKI SHOOTINGS VIDEO (Punch, 2nd November, 2020)



Two panels contrast the suppression of local press with the assertiveness of international media. In the first panel, a government figure labelled “FG” is gagging a journalist. In the second, “PRESS/CNN” works freely, indicating resistance to information control. The contrast in gazes, such as the fearful expressions in the first panel vs. firm focus in the second, positions viewers to recognise state repression and valorise truth-telling. The absence of eye contact in the CNN panel constructs objectivity and authority. Dark shading in panel one signifies coercion; brighter hues in panel two signify freedom and exposure. The black briefcase often symbolises official secrets, state power, or money to bribe the “press” to shut him up. The binary layout reinforces the ideological contrast between censorship and press independence. Labels serve as textual cues that anchor the socio-political context: the Lekki shootings controversy.

Datum 3: THE SARS SHOOTING RANGE (Business Day, 22nd October, 2020)



A police officer aims at targets representing Nigerian youths labelled “BEARD GANG,” “DREADLOCKS,” “ICT GUY,” “WELL-OFF,” etc. The metaphor of a shooting range critiques

police profiling and institutional violence. The policeman's direct vector toward the targets constructs a confrontation, positioning viewers as witnesses to unjust aggression. The police officer is represented as the enactor of a planned shoot; the targets are depicted with bull's-eyes centred on their heads. This is a symbolic 'shooting range' where civilians are targets by design. The youths, depicted as static targets, highlight vulnerability and lack of agency. Salience is created through the alignment of targets and the centred rifle vector. Colour contrast, such as the dark uniforms vs. bright youth representations, underscores ideological polarities between authority and victimhood. The title anchors the message, ensuring the metaphor is unambiguous.

Datum 4: ENDURE BAD GOVERNANCE (Business Day, 6th August, 2024)



A political leader marches with placards that paradoxically read “Endure Bad Governance” and “This Protest is Against All Protests.” His attire mimics youth culture, representing attempted populist identification. The leader’s confident posture contrasts with the crowd’s sceptical gaze, constructing a tension between performance and perception. Though his size and proximity suggest dominance, social distance is neutralised by the crowd’s sarcastic response, which strips away his legitimacy. *The president is a known activist who protests against autocratic governance, championing democracy and accountability, which makes the cartoon’s message especially ironic. By presenting Tinubu, a once pro-democracy activist, as a purveyor of endurance under bad governance, the cartoon offers a stark critique of political hypocrisy and elite betrayal.* The crowd’s speech bubble functions as a verbal counter-frame that exposes the leader’s insincerity. Foregrounding of the leader enhances his visual dominance, while the muted background prevents distraction. The juxtaposition of contradictory placards generates irony, and framing places the leader as the central but morally compromised figure.

Datum 5: NO TO PROTESTS (Business Day, 2nd August, 2024)



The cartoon depicts five actors: three holding placards that now read “No to Protest,” two whose earlier placards read “End Bad Government,” and a political figure extending bundles of cash. Protesters initially holding “End Bad Government” signs now display “No to Protest” placards after receiving money from a political figure. The money exchange symbolises compromised civic activism. The bowed posture and uneasy expressions of protesters create empathy and critique, positioning viewers to recognise moral tension and manipulation. The politician’s extended hand directs attention to corruption as the catalyst for behavioural change. The left-to-right narrative flow moves from principled resistance to compromised participation. Green-coloured cash visually indexes Nigerian corruption. The politician occupies the salience position, shaping the interpretation of the entire scene.

Summary of findings

Cartoons employ symbolic metaphors such as burial, shooting range, placards, and bribery to frame protest realities. Protesters are often central actors, represented as agents of truth, victims of state power, or citizens navigating compromised governance. Cartoons portray the state through aggressive, deceptive, or manipulative imagery. From police profiling to censorship to bribery, authority figures are constructed as obstructing justice and suppressing dissent. Elements such as raised placards, mournful gazes, and symbolic targets communicate collective frustration. Visual exaggeration enhances emotional resonance and ideological critique. Captions and labels anchor meanings: “Here Lies SARS,” “CNN Dares FG,” “Shooting Range,” “No to Protest.” They provide contextual grounding, making interpretations culturally intelligible. Colour contrast, spatial arrangement, framing, and salience guide viewers’ interpretation, foregrounding injustice,

hypocrisy, or resistance. Together, these patterns show that protest cartoons operate as alternative journalism, transforming visual humour into potent political commentary. They construct protest narratives, mobilise public sentiment, and record socio-political history from the perspective of dissent.

Conclusion

The study attempts a semiotic analysis of protest cartoons in 2020 and 2024 in selected Nigerian newspapers with insights from the Pragmatics Act theory to multimodal discourse approach. This study demonstrates that protest cartoons in Nigerian newspapers are powerful multimodal artefacts through which cartoonists articulate collective grievances, critique authority, and shape public discourse. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic model allowed a systematic exploration of how visual-verbal interactions encode meanings in Nigeria's protest contexts. The cartoons analysed depict protesters as agents of justice, expose state repression and manipulation, and represent protest itself as a negotiation between truth, power, and collective memory. They serve both journalistic and activist functions, informing, critiquing, and mobilising. By combining humour, symbolism, caricature, and textual anchorage, protest cartoons become accessible tools of civic education and political engagement. The study expands scholarship by linking protest episodes across 2020 and 2024, bridging traditional and contemporary forms of protest mediation, and demonstrating the interpretive richness of multimodal analysis in political communication. Future studies may broaden the corpus, compare digital and print protest imagery, or examine audience reception.

References

- Adeagbo, A. (2025). Multimodal communication strategies in digital protests of selected August 1, 2024, Nigeria protest. In *Conflict and representation in online communication* (pp. 103–130). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3373-5297-8.ch004>
- Adekanbi, G. (1997). *Cartoons in Nigerian mass media*. Lagos: Nelson Publishers.
- Adeoti, S. (2023). Pragmatic analysis of humour in selected Nigerian political cartoons. *Journal of Pragmatics and Discourse Studies*, 15(2), 44–59.
- Agberia, J. T. (2000). Cartoons as weapons of resistance: The Nigerian experience. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 3(1), 71–84.

- Ako, E., & Otoh, F. (2011). Semiotics of Nigerian newspaper cartoons: A Peircean analysis. *Lagos Journal of Communication Studies*, 5(2), 92–108.
- Allen, J. (1972). *The Aba Women's Riot of 1929*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Anderson, L. (2014). *The politics of protest: Moral performance and collective action*. Cambridge University Press.
- Conners, J. L. (2007). Popular culture in political cartoons: Analysing cartoonists' use of visual rhetoric. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 27(1), 7–29.
- Eesuola, O. (2012). The dynamics of protest and political mobilisation in Africa. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 6(1), 1–11.
- Falola, T., & Heaton, M. (2008). *A history of Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ganiyu, A. A. (2014). Political cartoons as visual encapsulations of public opinion in Nigeria. *International Journal of Communication*, 8, 2343–2361.
- George, C., & Liew, K. (2020). Political cartoons and mediated social commentary. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 30(2), 113–129.
- Harrower, T. (2010). *Inside reporting: A practical guide to the craft of journalism* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Hollander, J. A., & Einwohner, R. L. (2004). Conceptualising resistance. *Sociological Forum*, 19(4), 533–554.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11206-004-0694-5>
- Jewitt, C., & Oyama, R. (2001). Visual meaning: A social semiotic approach. In T. van Leeuwen & C. Jewitt (Eds.), *Handbook of visual analysis* (pp. 134–156). SAGE.
- Klingemann, H.-D. (1995). Party positions and voter orientations. *Political Studies*, 43(1), 123–152.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Makinde, F. (2022). Multimodal strategies in Nigerian political cartoons: A social semiotic analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 33(5), 547–563.
- Medubi, O. (2008). The semiotics of Nigerian newspaper cartoons. *The Nigerian Journal of Communication*, 6(1), 91–105.
- Ogunrinde, S., & Adegboye, B. (2024). Multimodal stylistic analysis of selected Nigerian newspaper cartoons. *Journal of Language and Social Communication Studies*, 12(1), 55–78.
- Okesola, S. O., & Oyebode, O. O. (2023). The soro-soke [speak up] generation: Multimodality and appraisal choices in selected #EndSARS civil protest-related memes in Nigeria. *Language and Semiotic Studies*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.1515/lass-2022-0016>
- Olaniyan, R. (2004). Cartoons and contemporary journalism in Nigeria. *Studies in Media & Society*, 2(1), 45–60.
- Popoola, T. (1983). *A history of editorial cartoons in the Nigerian press*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Terchek, R. (1974). Protest politics and public confrontation. In H. Kritzer (Ed.), *Political behaviour and confrontation* (pp. 77–93). Princeton University Press.
- Usman, M. (2024). A semiotic analysis of #EndSARS editorial cartoons in Nigerian newspapers. *African Journal of Media and Communication*, 9(1), 33–52.
- Ugochukwu, F. (2011). Visual rhetoric and political communication in Nigerian cartoons. *African Arts*, 44(3), 38–47.