

# 'I am not a criminal!': social semiotics and ideology in cartoons related to the #EndSARS movement

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## Abstract

The #EndSARS social movement in Nigeria garnered considerable attention in 2020 as activists employed diverse means of communication to increase awareness of police brutality and advocate justice. This research aimed to examine the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies employed in cartoons associated with the #EndSARS social movement. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) Social Semiotics, this study sought to unveil the underlying ideologies and socio-political messages conveyed through the strategic use of semiotic resources in the cartoons. The research undertook a qualitative analysis of 12 cartoons purposively selected and published on various social media outlets between October and December 2020. The study reveals that non-verbal resources such as symbolism and iconic representations played a vital role in representing the power dynamics, social inequalities and oppressive structures prevalent in Nigerian society. The analysis also reveals that textual elements in the cartoons, including captions, inscriptions, speech bubbles and headlines, were strategically employed to reinforce the ideologies and socio-political messages conveyed in the cartoons, complementing the visual messages. The ideologies and socio-political messages evident in the analysis include power dynamics, resistance to oppression, police brutality, youth empowerment, social inequalities, accountability and justice, and profiling and victimisation. The study concludes that the strategic use of visual metaphors, iconic representations, facial expressions, body language, colour and verbal resources allows cartoonists to communicate the urgency for justice, challenge authority, call for social change and mobilise support for the #EndSARS social movement.

**Keywords:** cartooning, ideology, Nigeria, social semiotics, #EndSARS

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## 1. Introduction

The #EndSARS social movement in Nigeria garnered considerable attention in 2020 as activists employed diverse means of communication to increase awareness of police brutality and to advocate justice and accountability. Throughout the movement, different forms of media and communication played a vital role in disseminating information, mobilising supporters and shaping public opinion. One prominent medium which was employed during this period was cartooning. The #EndSARS movement sparked a wave of creativity and activism, leading to the production of numerous cartoons that circulated on social media platforms and in newspapers. These cartoons not only captured the attention of a wide audience but also served as potent tools for expressing dissent, raising awareness and challenging power structures.<sup>1</sup> Through their unique blend of visual imagery, textual elements and symbolic representations, cartoons possess the potential to communicate complex ideas in a concise and impactful manner.

By employing the theoretical framework of Kress and Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotics,<sup>2</sup> this study examines the various semiotic resources used in cartoons associated with the #EndSARS movement. Verbal resources such as captions, speech bubbles and textual elements are examined to understand how linguistic choices contribute to the construction of meaning and the representation of social and political issues. In addition, non-verbal resources such as visual symbols, colours and compositional arrangements are analysed to uncover the visual strategies employed to convey specific messages, evoke emotions and challenge dominant narratives. The research also explores the underlying ideologies and socio-political messages embedded in the cartoons in order to identify the values, beliefs and perspectives that inform these cartoons and provide insights into the collective aspirations, concerns and grievances of the movement. The study's research problem seeks to respond to the following questions:

- How do verbal resources deployed in cartoons associated with the #EndSARS movement contribute to the construction of meaning and the representation of social and political issues?
- What non-verbal resources are used in the selected cartoons to evoke emotions and challenge dominant narratives?
- What are the underlying ideologies and socio-political messages embedded in cartoons associated with the #EndSARS movement?

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<sup>1</sup> D Ezegwu, E Ntegwung, G Nwodu & A Nengi 'Analysis of select Nigerian newspapers framing of cartoons on EndSARS protest' (2022) 5(1) *GVU Journal of Communication Studies* 61–71.

<sup>2</sup> G Kress & T van Leeuwen *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (Routledge 2006).

This study contributes to the existing literature on communication, social movements and visual culture by examining the role of cartoons as vehicles for expressing socio-political messages. By employing a social semiotic approach, it offers a comprehensive understanding of the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies employed in the cartoons associated with the #EndSARS movement, unveiling the underlying ideologies and socio-political messages conveyed through their strategic use of semiotic resources.

## 2. Multimodality and socio-political cartoons

Multimodality investigates the ways in which different semiotic modes or resources are combined within a given socio-cultural domain in order to create a semiotic event.<sup>3</sup> This theory is predicated on the idea that verbal communication cannot be expressed fully without making reference to non-verbal communications such as painting, images, symbols and colours. Ariyo<sup>4</sup> affirms that:

multimodal discourse analysis is essentially concerned with the theory and analysis of semantic resources at the semantic expansion which occur as semiotic choices combined in multimodality phenomena.

Socio-political cartoons are among the most potent form of multimodal media for conveying meaning by combining verbal and non-verbal semiotic aspects.

A socio-political cartoon is an illustrated depiction that typically offers commentary on contemporary events or individuals.<sup>5</sup> It falls into a distinct genre of political journalism, characterised by visual representations that portray political and social matters and occurrences in a concise, simplified form.<sup>6</sup> Political cartoons are typically concise and straightforward, yet they contain substantial information that requires decoding through an initial grasp of the context, that is, the circumstances in which they are presented. This expressive technique, involving pictorial depictions, is marked by the use of humorous portrayals of events and individuals. It employs irony and satire skilfully to criticise and humorously highlight someone's shortcomings in a playful, clever and artistic manner.

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<sup>3</sup> G Kress & T van Leeuwen *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* (Arnold Publishers 2001).

<sup>4</sup> K Ariyo 'Satirizing the Nigerian climate: Multimodal discourse analysis of selected political cartoons from *TELL* news magazine' (2017) 3(4) *Asian Research Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 1–10.

<sup>5</sup> I Omolabi & M Zakariyah 'A critical pragmatic analysis of selected political cartoons in Nigerian newspapers' (2018) 1(1) *New Explorations in Applied Linguistics and Literature Festschrift in Honour of Prof Samuel K Tswana* 1–10.

<sup>6</sup> G Test *Satire: Spirit and Art* (University of South Florida Press 1991).

Socio-political cartoons are ‘enormously rich in the complexity of their evaluative meanings, and verbal and visual resources are mobilised and deployed to construct these meanings’.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, being multimodal texts, these cartoons integrate different forms of communicative mode, both verbal and non-verbal, to convey cognitive effects with the aim of enabling readers to comprehend the whole meaning of the communicative act.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Literature review

Several research studies have been carried out from the standpoint of multimodality and social semiotics in various forms of communication with the aim of understanding how meaning is constructed and conveyed through multiple modes of communication, including language, visuals, gestures and other non-verbal elements. Bezemer et al<sup>9</sup> show how learning can be investigated using a multimodal social semiotic approach. They apply the approach to three different institutions – a school, a museum and a hospital – illustrating key concepts and raising issues about pedagogy and technology in contemporary society.

Stoian<sup>10</sup> deploys Kress and Van Leeuwen’s grammar of visual design to analyse an image advertising honeymoon packages with the aim of illustrating the key points presented by the theory to the readers. The study concludes that Kress and Van Leeuwen’s model is applicable to many domains, such as promotion, websites, teaching materials, tourism and/or cultural aspects of non-verbal communication, among other domains. Yang,<sup>11</sup> using a social semiotic approach, analyses the representational, interactive and compositional meaning of the school badge of Xi’an Jiaotong University, China. The study reveals that school badges have rich connotations and the ability to read them should be given due importance.

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<sup>7</sup> J Lemke *Visual and Verbal Resources for Evaluative Meaning in Political Cartoons* (Faculty of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, University of Vienna Conference 1997) 3.

<sup>8</sup> M Rivas-Carmona ‘Cartooning for gender equality: A multimodal expression of “humour” and “vindication”’ (2014) 4(24) *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 8–19.

<sup>9</sup> J Bezemer, S Diamantopoulou, C Jewitt, G Kress & D Mavers *Using a Social Semiotic Approach to Multimodality: Researching Learning in Schools, Museums and Hospitals* (National Centre for Research Methods Working Paper 2012).

<sup>10</sup> C Stoian ‘Analysing images: A social semiotic perspective’ (2015) 14(1) *Scientific Bulletin of the Politehnica University of Timișoara Transactions on Modern Languages* 23–30.

<sup>11</sup> Y Yang ‘A social semiotic approach to multimodal discourse of the badge of Xi’an Jiaotong University’ (2016) 6(8) *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 1596–1601.

Amore and Atoloye<sup>12</sup> analysed some cartoons connected to Nigeria's 2015 general elections with a view to identifying the way in which verbal and non-verbal meaning is communicated through them. The analysis shows that social semiotic reference is pivotal in the relationship between political discourse and ideology, confirming O'Halloran's position<sup>13</sup> that metaphorical constructions of meaning take place across linguistic and visual elements. Omolabi and Abiodun<sup>14</sup> explore social semiotic theory perceived with the use of language in political cartoons in order to bring to the fore the covert meanings concealed in them and to correct societal ills in witty and humorous ways. Their study reveals that more meaning would have been lost, if not for the advancement of scholars on the exponent of multimodality. Nevertheless, this present research offers a distinct advancement in the field of multimodality and social semiotics by using Kress and Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotics<sup>15</sup> to expose the hidden ideologies and socio-political messages conveyed through the deliberate use of verbal and non-verbal strategies in specific cartoons associated with the #EndSARS social movement.

#### 4. Theoretical framework

This research adopts Kress and Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic approach to multimodality, which traces its roots back to Functional Linguistics, particularly the research conducted by Halliday (1978).<sup>16</sup> This approach has subsequently evolved into a theory of creating multimodal signs through the contributions of Hodge, Kress and Van Leeuwen.<sup>17,18</sup> According to Hallidayan theory, language is a result of social processes. The linguistic resources of a language are influenced by the functions it has acquired to meet people's communicative needs in their daily lives. Hodge and Kress<sup>19</sup> expanded Halliday's framework beyond language to encompass sign-making in a broader sense. They argue

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<sup>12</sup> K Amore & L Atoloye 'A systemic functional-multimodal discourse analysis of some cartoons connected with Nigeria's 2015 general elections' (2016) 13(1) *The Nigerian Journal of Communication* 23–46.

<sup>13</sup> K O'Halloran 'Systemic functional-multimodal discourse analysis (SF-MDA): Constructing ideational meaning using language and visual imagery' (2008) 7(4) *Visual Communication* 443–475.

<sup>14</sup> I Omolabi & A Abiodun 'A semiotic study of selected political cartoons in Nigerian newspapers' (2020) 8(1) *All Nations University Journal of Applied Thought* 151–164.

<sup>15</sup> Kress & Van Leeuwen (n 3).

<sup>16</sup> MAK Halliday *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (Edward Arnold 1978).

<sup>17</sup> R Hodge & G Kress *Social Semiotics* (Polity 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Kress & Van Leeuwen (n 3).

<sup>19</sup> Kress & Van Leeuwen (n 3); Hodge & Kress (n 17).

that societies develop and shape all semiotic resources to serve specific social functions and convey a social group's values, knowledge systems (referred to as discourses), structures and power dynamics. Hodge and Kress provide various examples from diverse social contexts involving different modes of communication, with a primary focus on writing and visual elements in 'print' media such as magazines and billboards.

Kress and Van Leeuwen<sup>20</sup> expanded upon Halliday's work by introducing the concept of meaning as choice, which formed the basis for their social semiotic approach to the visual and their understanding of the visual as a mode. This development, according to Omolabi and Abiodun,<sup>21</sup> paved the way for the exploration of multimodality, enabling a discussion of important concepts such as composition, modality and framing. The exploration of mode and multiple modes gained prominence in social semiotic research during the early 2000s, and this resulted in the expansion of multimodality and a re-evaluation of the boundaries of individual modes. This also involved an examination of the shared principles underlying multimodal communication.

Social semiotics aims to comprehend the process of creating cultural representations and their impact in their respective social contexts. This involves investigating their role and potential meanings in the realm of communication.<sup>22</sup> By examining the textual characteristics, social semiotics scrutinises the way these representations reflect social dynamics, power dynamics, the act of signification and the intentions of those who create the signs, the intended audience and the social objectives achieved through the texts. Kress and Van Leeuwen<sup>23</sup> note that the key idea behind this approach is that cultures shape and structure communication media into various systems for creating meaning in order to express the specific meanings required by different communities based on their practical and social needs.

Kress and Van Leeuwen<sup>24</sup> adopted Halliday's metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal and textual) as a theoretical framework for analysing semiotic ensembles. They demonstrate how verbal and visual signifiers in a semiotic ensemble communicate various meanings. In visual grammar, Kress and Van Leeuwen<sup>25</sup> propose three metafunctions: representational, interactive and compositional meaning. When applied to visual systems, the ideational metafunction

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<sup>20</sup> Kress & Van Leeuwen (n 3); G Kress & T van Leeuwen *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (Routledge 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Omolabi & Abiodun (n 14) 154.

<sup>22</sup> Kress & Van Leeuwen (n 3).

<sup>23</sup> Kress & Van Leeuwen (n 20).

<sup>24</sup> Kress & Van Leeuwen (n 20).

<sup>25</sup> Kress & Van Leeuwen (n 20).

governs the relationships between 'represented participants' to depict the world around us. The interpersonal metafunction manages the interaction between represented participants and viewers and the textual metafunction brings together the different elements to form a cohesive and complete image.<sup>26</sup> Kress and Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotics is a suitable theoretical framework for this study as it enables a comprehensive analysis of the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies used in cartoons related to the #EndSARS social movement and helps to uncover the ideologies embedded within them, providing a deeper understanding of their social and cultural significance.

## 5. Methodology

The data for this study are cartoons published during the height of the #EndSARS social movement, which emerged in Nigeria to protest against police brutality and demand the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit. In order to ensure a diverse range of perspectives on this discourse, 12 cartoons published on various social media outlets between October and December 2020, including *The Punch*, *Nairaland*, *News Telegraph*, *Daily Trust*, *Twitter* and *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, are purposively selected to examine visual elements such as colours, symbols, facial expressions and composition and also linguistic features such as captions, speech bubbles, inscriptions and slogans. The study adopts a qualitative approach in the analysis of the data. Kress and Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotics<sup>27</sup> serves as the theoretical framework for this study with the aim of unveiling the underlying ideologies and socio-political messages conveyed through the strategic use of verbal and non-verbal resources in the selected #EndSARS social movement-related cartoons.

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<sup>26</sup> Yang (n 11) 1597.

<sup>27</sup> Kress & Van Leeuwen (n 3).

## 6. Analysis



Cartoon 1

www.newtelegraphng.com – November 2020

The cartoon depicts a policeman about to leave for duty, carrying a gun, while his wife sheds tears and pleads with him not to go back to the location of the #EndSARS protests.

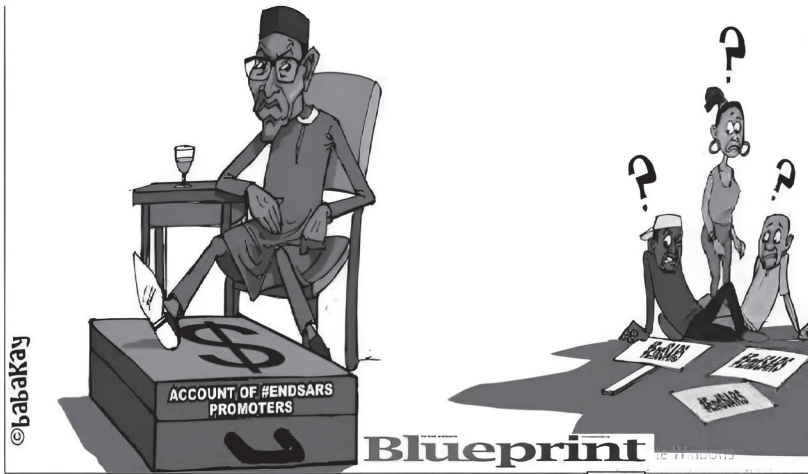
**Verbal resources:** The woman's utterance, '*After surviving the #EndSARS protests? You can't go back there ... I'm too young to become a widow!*' highlights the dangers associated with the #EndSARS protests, suggesting that they were violent and potentially life-threatening. By expressing her fear of becoming a widow, the woman emphasises the potential loss of life and the devastating consequences of the husband's return to the protest location.

**Non-verbal resources:** The cartoon portrays the husband as a policeman carrying a gun, indicating his role in law enforcement and his potential exposure to danger. This choice aligns with the context of the #EndSARS movement, which aimed to deal with police brutality in Nigeria. The wife's emotional state, shedding tears and holding onto the husband, signifies her fear and concern for his safety. The cartoonist's decision to dress the woman as a 'typical Nigerian wife' in a wrapper, blouse and scarf reflects cultural markers associated with traditional gender roles and Nigerian attire. This depiction serves to emphasise the personal and domestic dimension of the wife's plea and situates the narrative in a Nigerian socio-cultural context. The husband's expression of surprise and confusion conveys his lack of understanding of the wife's deep emotions and fear. This facial expression suggests a disparity between the husband's duty as a



law-enforcement officer and his wife’s perspective on the potential dangers associated with his job.

The cartoon uses these verbal and non-verbal resources to draw attention to the perceived dangers of the protests, potentially framing them as violent and life-threatening. The cartoon also touches on gender dynamics, depicting a concerned wife pleading with her husband not to return to the protest location out of fear for his safety. This representation draws attention to the potential impact political movements have on individuals’ personal lives and calls for empathy and understanding from those in positions of power.



Cartoon 2  
www.blueprint.ng – November 2020

The cartoon portrays former President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, sitting on a chair and placing his leg on a box which has the inscription ‘Account of #EndSARS Promoters’. The cartoon also features three participants who look dejected and frustrated.

**Verbal resources:** The use of the term ‘#EndSARS promoters’ highlights the social movement that emerged in Nigeria in 2020 to call for the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a controversial police unit. Referring to them as ‘promoters’ suggests a positive stance towards the movement and implies that they are actively advocating change.

**Non-verbal resources:** By portraying former President Muhammadu Buhari sitting on a chair and placing his leg on the account of #EndSARS promoters, the cartoon uses non-verbal resources to convey power dynamics. Buhari’s seated position signifies his authority and control, while placing his leg on the account suggests an act of confiscation or control over the movement’s financial resources. The three dejected and frustrated participants on the right side of the

cartoon represent the protesters. Their facial expressions and body language indicate their dissatisfaction and despair resulting from the confiscation of their account. These visual cues emphasise the negative impact Buhari's actions have on the movement and convey the emotional state of the protesters.

This cartoon conveys ideological and socio-political messages related to power dynamics, leadership, frustration and injustice in the context of the #EndSARS social movement. It criticises the actions of former President Buhari, portraying him as a figure of authority who hinders the movement's progress. The strategic placement of Buhari in a position of power, exerting control over the movement's resources, highlights the ideological perspective that leadership in Nigeria is portrayed as tough and hard on protesters. This suggests a dominant narrative that positions those in power as suppressing dissent and hindering grassroots movements seeking change.



Cartoon 3

Blueprint newspaper – 11 November 2020

The cartoon portrays a man sitting on a comfortable chair and reading a newspaper. Written on the front page of the newspaper is: 'News: #EndSARS PROMOTERS MUST FACE THE LAW – Presidency.'

**Verbal resources:** The newspaper headline: 'News: #EndSARS PROMOTERS MUST FACE THE LAW – Presidency' communicates a specific viewpoint held by the presidency, suggesting that those involved in promoting the #EndSARS movement should be held accountable and face legal consequences. This verbal resource reflects the ideology of the ruling government, which is against the #EndSARS movement. The man's statement: 'Let the sleeping dog lie!' appears to express shock in response to the newspaper's content. However, the phrase 'Let the

sleeping dog lie!’ is an idiomatic expression implying that it is better to leave a situation alone and avoid stirring up trouble. This statement reflects a passive stance towards the issues raised by the #EndSARS movement as it implies a reluctance to engage in or to take action.

**Non-verbal resources:** The man’s facial expression of surprise indicates that he was not expecting the content he encountered in the newspaper. This expression indicates the contrast between his expectations and the news, potentially suggesting a lack of awareness or deliberate ignorance of the socio-political issues surrounding the #EndSARS movement.

The cartoon presents a critical viewpoint of the government’s response to the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria. The verbal resource of the newspaper headline, along with the man’s surprised reaction, implies that the ruling government seeks to take punitive action against the movement’s promoters. The man’s surprised facial expression suggests a sense of disengagement from and complacency about the issues raised by the movement. These resources convey a socio-political message that criticises the government’s stance while highlighting societal indifference or apathy towards the #EndSARS movement.



Cartoon 4

www.newtelegraphng.com – December 2020

The cartoon depicts a multitude of people, identified as politicians, running in the same direction, seemingly in a state of panic.

**Verbal resources:** The verbal resource in the cartoon includes the dialogue spoken by one of the politicians: *‘See what #EndSARS protest has caused us. We can no longer sleep in peace in our houses with our eyes closed!’*

This statement suggests that the politician is attributing a negative consequence to the #EndSARS protest. It implies that the politicians' loss of peace and security in their own homes is a direct result of the protest. This verbal resource frames the #EndSARS movement as disruptive and harmful to the political elite. It emphasises their discomfort and satirises them as victims.

**Non-verbal resources:** The cartoon depicts some politicians running in the same direction, seemingly in a state of panic, as if running for their lives. This visual representation conveys a sense of fear and threat experienced by the politicians and implies that the #EndSARS movement is a force that is causing distress and fear among the political elite. The visual composition of the cartoon, with the politicians at the forefront and running together, positions them as a collective group. This grouping implies a shared interest and responsibility for the situation they find themselves in.

The cartoon uses both verbal and non-verbal resources to convey messages that satirise the Nigerian politicians and emphasise the disruption and threat posed by the movement to the political elite. The cartoon implies that the #EndSARS movement has disrupted the status quo, disturbing the peace and security enjoyed by the political elite. This portrayal indirectly highlights the potential impact of social movements in challenging established power structures.



Cartoon 5

*The Punch* – 26 November 2020

The cartoon, which has the caption 'CNN Dares FG, Releases Second Lekki Shooting Video', has two frames. The verbal and non-verbal resources deployed in the cartoon are discussed below.

**Verbal resources:** The caption: 'CNN Dares FG, Releases Second Lekki Shooting Video' reflects the defiance of CNN, a global media outlet,

towards the Federal Government (FG) of Nigeria. It implies that CNN is challenging the FG's narrative by releasing a video related to the Lekki shooting incident during the #EndSARS protests.

**Non-verbal resources:** The man dressed in an Agbada, traditional Nigerian attire associated with politicians, represents the FG. This choice of attire associates the FG with political power and authority. The briefcase with an 'FG' tag held by the man in Agbada further reinforces his identification as the representative of the FG. In the first frame, the man representing 'press freedom' is depicted as oppressed and dejected. He is shown kneeling and gagged, conveying a sense of suppression and powerlessness. The man in Agbada, representing the FG, is portrayed as furious and aggressive and he exhibits dominance and control over the press.

In the second frame, the roles are reversed. The man representing the FG is now the one kneeling, while a white man labelled 'press freedom' is shown seated on him. This reversal of positions shows a shift in power dynamics and suggests that press freedom has gained the upper hand over the FG.

The cartoon uses visual and textual cues to criticise the FG's actions and advocate press freedom. This advocacy aligns with the objectives of the #EndSARS social movement in Nigeria. It portrays the power dynamics and tensions between the government and the press, and also sheds light on the ideological struggles surrounding the issue of freedom of expression in the country.



Cartoon 6

*Daily Trust* – 26 November 2020

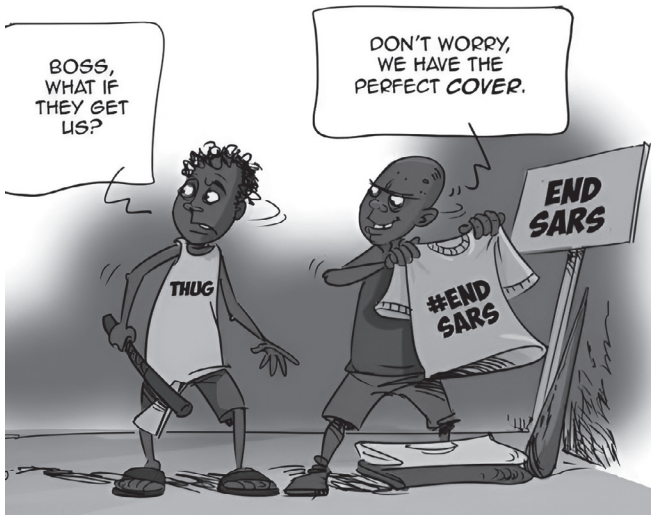
The cartoon is set in a graveyard and features a young man who represents the Nigerian youth bleeding from his head, holding a shovel and looking battered and angry.

**Verbal resources:** The inscription on the gravestone, '*HERE LIES SARS 1992–2020. Killed by its misconduct and oppression of innocent*

*Nigerians'*, is a symbolic representation of the cause of SARS' demise. It conveys the idea that SARS was responsible for its own downfall due to its misconduct and oppression of innocent Nigerians.

**Non-verbal resources:** The use of a graveyard as the setting creates a somber and serious atmosphere as it evokes a sense of loss and finality. This choice of setting implies that SARS is permanently laid to rest and will not return. The young man in the cartoon represents the Nigerian youth and is depicted as bleeding from his head, holding a shovel and appearing battered and angry. These visual cues indicate that the youth have suffered and fought against SARS. The bleeding head suggests physical violence and the anger reflects the frustration and resistance experienced by the Nigerian youth. Despite the injuries depicted, the young man stands confidently, signalling resilience and determination. This posture conveys the idea that the Nigerian youth are unyielding in their pursuit of justice and the dismantling of SARS. The gravestone serves as a central visual element. It displays prominently the inscription detailing the reasons for SARS' demise. This symbolises the accountability demanded by the Nigerian youth for SARS' actions and reinforces the idea that the misconduct and oppression of innocent Nigerians led to its downfall.

The cartoon's explicit criticism of SARS aligns with the #EndSARS social movement's core message of addressing police brutality and advocating police reform. The portrayal of the young man bleeding but standing confidently with a shovel signifies the strength, resilience and determination of the Nigerian youth in challenging SARS. It conveys a message of empowerment and positions the youth as agents of change in the fight for justice.



Cartoon 7

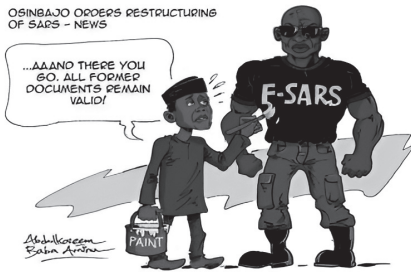
*Nairaland* – 9 December 2020

The cartoon represents two participants, portrayed as thugs; one of them is seen holding an axe and wearing a singlet with the inscription 'thug'; the other is holding a shirt, which has the inscription '#EndSARS'.

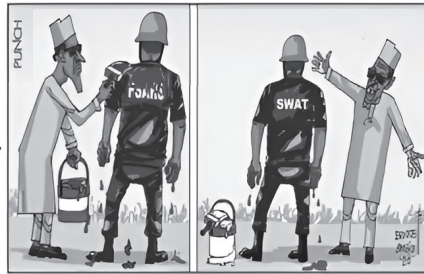
**Verbal resources:** One of the thugs is depicted wearing a singlet with the inscription 'thug'. This verbal resource serves to label and identify the character as a thug and emphasises their involvement in violent activities. The thug expresses concern about potential consequences, asking 'Boss, what if they get us?' This dialogue indicates that the thugs are aware of the risks they are taking and suggests a lack of concern for the potential harm they may cause during the #EndSARS protest. The other thug is depicted holding a shirt with the inscription '#EndSARS.' This verbal resource reveals their intention to disguise themselves as #EndSARS protesters, indicating a deceptive strategy to infiltrate the movement. The thug holding the #EndSARS shirt reassures the other thug by saying, 'Don't worry. We have the perfect cover.' This statement implies that the thugs believe their disguise as #EndSARS protesters will protect them and allow them to carry out their disruptive activities unnoticed.

**Non-verbal resources:** The thug holding the axe is depicted in a threatening posture. This indicates the potential violence associated with their presence. It suggests their intention to instigate chaos and harm during the protest. The setting of the cartoon is during an #EndSARS protest. By situating the cartoon in the protest context, it highlights the vulnerability of the peaceful protesters to the disruption caused by these disguised thugs.

One of the ideologies represented in the cartoon is the criminalisation of the #EndSARS movement. The cartoon portrays the presence of thugs in the #EndSARS protest and suggests an attempt to associate the movement with violence and criminality. This reinforces a negative stereotype that seeks to discredit the legitimate grievances and demands of the protesters. The cartoon also aims to convey a message about the perceived threat of external actors seeking to undermine the movement's goals by inciting violence and chaos.



Cartoon 8  
Twitter (Abdulkareem Aminu) – 4 October 2020



Cartoon 9  
The Punch – October 2020

Cartoons 8 and 9 complement each other in their meaning-making.

**Verbal resources:** In cartoon 8, the caption *'Osinbajo orders restructuring of SARS – News'* provides important contextual information. It indicates that the former vice president, Yemi Osinbajo, has taken action to acknowledge public demand by restructuring the SARS. The speech bubble attributed to the vice president, *'Aaand there you go. All former documents remain valid!'* adds a touch of irony. It suggests that, despite the restructuring, the issues associated with SARS might persist and the reforms may not address the public's concerns adequately.

In cartoon 9, the initial inscription of 'FSARS' on the policeman's back refers to the controversial Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad, which had become synonymous with human rights abuses and police brutality. The replacement inscription of 'SWAT' signifies the new squad, 'Special Weapons and Tactics', introduced by the government as a supposed replacement of FSARS.

**Non-verbal resources:** The depiction of Yemi Osinbajo in cartoon 8 holding a bucket of paint and painting off the inscription 'F-SARS' on the shirt of a huge, gallant police officer conveys the visual message of an attempt to remove the negative association with SARS. The vice president's terrified expression reflects the challenges and difficulties associated with reforming the controversial unit.

The green and white colours of the paint used by President Buhari in cartoon 9 signify the Nigerian national colours, indicating the involvement of the government in the situation. This usage implies a sense of authority and official action. The act of President Buhari painting off the 'F-SARS' inscription is similar to Osinbajo's act in cartoon 8 and represents a symbolic gesture of erasure. This suggests an attempt to remove the negative association and public perception of the former squad. The cheerful mood depicted in the second frame implies satisfaction and confidence in the replacement with 'SWAT' and indicates a belief in the effectiveness of this change.

Both cartoons employ visual and verbal resources to criticise the government's response to the demands for police reform. It suggests that the replacement of 'F-SARS' with SWAT is an insufficient and symbolic gesture that fails to resolve the underlying issues and demands of the Nigerian people. The use of irony in the vice president's quotation, *'Aaand there you go. All former documents remain valid!'*, indicates scepticism about the effectiveness of the announced restructuring. It implies that, despite the official actions, the problems with SARS may persist.





Cartoon 10

*Deutsche Welle (dw.com) – October 2020*

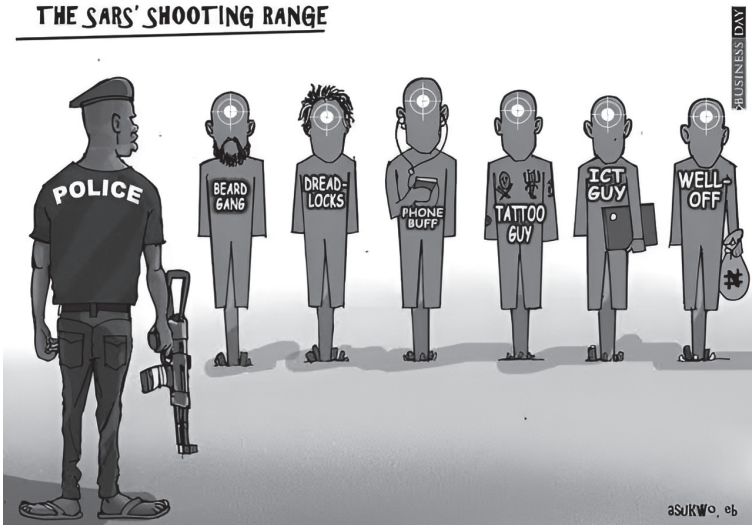
The cartoon features two participants – a huge police officer and a diminutive man. The police officer points his gun at the young #EndSARS protester, who is seen holding a placard with the caption ‘End Police Brutality’.

**Verbal resources:** The verbal resource of the placard caption communicates the central message and demand of the #EndSARS social movement in Nigeria. It signifies the protesters’ collective desire to put an end to police brutality in the country. This phrase encapsulates the movement’s ideology: the need for change and justice.

**Non-verbal resources:** The contrast in size between the police officer and the #EndSARS protester is a significant non-verbal resource in the cartoon. The police officer is depicted as huge, symbolising authority, power and dominance. On the other hand, the protester is portrayed as miniature, representing the vulnerability and relative powerlessness of the individual in the face of the oppressive system. The gesture of the small protester stretching out his leg to kick away the tip of the gun demonstrates defiance and resoluteness. This act of resistance signifies the unwavering determination of #EndSARS protesters to challenge and oppose police brutality. The sad and pitiful look on the police officer’s face serves to humanise the officer and evoke empathy from the viewer. This facial expression portrays the officer as remorseful and suggests that even those within the system may recognise the injustice of police brutality. It implies that the issue of police brutality affects not only the victims but also the conscience of some law-enforcement officers.

The strategic use of verbal and non-verbal resources in the cartoon description conveys the ideology of power imbalance, as portrayed by

the contrast in size between the police officer and the protester, with the police representing the oppressive system and the protester representing the marginalised and oppressed. The gesture of the protester kicking away the gun portrays defiance and unwavering determination in the face of oppression. It conveys the message that #EndSARS protesters are resolute in challenging and resisting police brutality.



Cartoon 11

Twitter (Enough is Enough Nigeria) – 4 October 2020

The cartoon with the caption, 'The SARS' Shooting Range', features a police officer holding a gun and six shooting target carriers with various inscriptions on them.

**Verbal resources:** The caption '*The SARS' Shooting Range*' establishes that the depicted scene is related to SARS, a unit of the Nigerian Police Force known for its alleged human rights abuses. The inscriptions on the shooting targets – 'Beard Gang', 'Dreadlocks', 'Phone Buff', 'Tattoo Guy', 'ICT Guy' and 'Well-Off' – represent different social groups that have been targeted by the Nigerian police. These labels highlight specific characteristics associated with these groups. They indicate that these traits render individuals more likely to be subjected to police brutality and harassment.

**Non-verbal resources:** The central figure of the cartoon is a police officer holding an AK-47, a symbol of authority and power. The presence of the firearm communicates the use of force and violence by the police and reinforces the perception of the Nigerian police as a coercive and oppressive institution. The positioning of the shooting target carriers with the inscriptions directly in front of the police officer signifies their vulnerability and the systematic targeting they experience.

The cartoon stresses the systemic issues in the Nigerian Police Force, specifically the actions of the SARS unit. It criticises the unit's discriminatory practices and its tendency to target specific social groups based on appearance or socio-economic status. The cartoon suggests that the Nigerian Police Force engages in the profiling and victimisation of individuals who possess certain physical attributes (beard, dreadlocks, tattoos) or who belong to specific social categories (phone buffs, ICT guys, well-off individuals). This reinforces the idea that the police unfairly target and discriminate against individuals based on superficial characteristics. The cartoon supports the #ENDSARS movement's goals by highlighting the abusive practices of the police force and the urgent need for systemic change.



Cartoon 12

Meeting of Minds – 8 December 2020

The cartoon is set during an #EndSARS protest. Protesters who look angry and agitated are seen carrying placards with different inscriptions on them while a face-off occurs between a SARS officer and a young man.

**Verbal resources:** The placard inscriptions – ‘You should be protecting us not killing us’, ‘Stop killing the youths!’, ‘It is just a hairstyle’, ‘End SARS now’, ‘I am not a fraudster because I use iPhone’ – reflect the protesters’ demands and frustrations regarding police brutality and the actions of SARS. They convey the ideology that the police should protect citizens rather than harm them. The slogans also highlight the targeting of young people and the belief that physical appearance, such as dreadlocks or using an iPhone, should not be a ground for suspicion or mistreatment. The inscriptions aim to challenge the dominant narratives surrounding the criminalisation of certain groups

and call for an end to the SARS unit. The young man's plea '*Please don't shoot. I am not a criminal!*' emphasises the fear and vulnerability experienced by individuals targeted by the police. His statement challenges the assumption that appearance alone should determine guilt or criminality. It also reflects the power dynamics between the police and citizens and stresses the urgent need for protection and fairness. The police officer's statement, '*I will kill you and nothing will happen*', represents a brutal and authoritarian attitude. It expresses a sense of impunity and disregard for human life. This statement reveals the entrenched power dynamics within law enforcement and the perception that accountability is lacking. It serves to highlight the systemic issues and abuse of power that the #EndSARS movement seeks to address.

**Non-verbal resources:** The facial expressions and body language of the protesters, including anger and agitation, convey their frustration and determination to challenge the status quo. The young man's pleading expression and the fierce, bitter expression of the police officer represent the stark contrast in power dynamics and the potential consequences faced by citizens when interacting with law enforcement. These non-verbal cues evoke empathy for and solidarity with the protesters' cause. The visual representation of the inscriptions on the placards serves as a powerful visual resource. They amplify the verbal messages and make them more accessible and memorable. The use of bold typography, colours and legible text on the placards ensures the visibility and impact of the messages.

The cartoon employs a combination of verbal and non-verbal resources to convey socio-political messages and criticise the actions of law enforcement during the #EndSARS movement. It challenges the dominant ideologies surrounding police brutality, discriminatory practices and the abuse of power. The cartoon supports the demand for justice, accountability, and an end to the targeted violence against Nigerian youths.

## 7. Discussion of findings

This study aimed to examine the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies deployed in cartoons associated with the #EndSARS social movement in Nigeria. By adopting Kress and Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotics theory, the analysis revealed both the multi-layered nature of these cartoons and the interaction between verbal and non-verbal resources in constructing meaning, framing ideologies and influencing public opinion. This research revealed that non-verbal resources such as body language and facial expressions played a vital role in portraying the emotions, intentions and power relations in the scenarios depicted. #EndSARS protesters were often portrayed with

defiant expressions and resolute gestures, such as standing upright and confidently in cartoon 6, stretching out one's leg to kick away the tip of the gun held by the police officer in cartoon 10, and protesters looking angry and agitated in cartoon 12. These body languages and facial expressions symbolise the protesters' determination and their resistance to oppressive forces.

Furthermore, the cartoonists used symbolism and iconic representations extensively to represent the power dynamics, social inequalities and oppressive structures prevalent in Nigerian society. For instance, in cartoon 2, the symbolic representation of Buhari in a position of power, exerting control over the #EndSARS movement's resources, indicates the ideological perspective that the leadership in Nigeria is portrayed as tough and hard on protesters. Likewise in cartoon 10, the contrast in size between the police officer and the #EndSARS protester is a powerful symbol in the cartoon. The police officer is depicted as huge, symbolising authority and dominance. On the other hand, the protester is portrayed as miniature, representing the vulnerability of the individual in the face of the oppressive system. The gravestone in cartoon 6 with the inscription on it symbolises the accountability demanded by the Nigerian youth for SARS' actions and reinforces the idea that the misconduct and oppression of innocent Nigerians led to its downfall. These symbolic representations were employed to evoke emotions and convey resistance to police brutality and corruption.

The study further revealed that the use of colour and visual style in the cartoons was purposeful in evoking emotional responses and capturing the attention of viewers. The visibility and impact of the messages embedded in cartoon 12 are ensured through the use of bold typography, colours and legible text on the placards. In addition, the diversity of the colours of the placard inscriptions highlights the interconnectedness of the #EndSARS movement, as they take on various issues concerning youths, appearance and socio-economic stereotypes. This visual resource contributed to the overall impact and interpretation of the cartoons.

Satire is another strategy deployed by cartoonists to draw attention to the follies, vices and questionable actions of politicians and government officials. Through exaggerated caricatures and visual metaphors, the cartoonists mock and criticise those in power. An instance of this is seen in cartoon 4, where politicians are portrayed metaphorically as the victims of the #EndSARS social movement. The cartoon implies that the movement has disrupted the status quo, disturbing the peace and security enjoyed by the political elite. The reversal of roles in the second frame of cartoon 5 challenges the dominant power structure. The cartoon satirises the Nigerian government by portraying it as being oppressed by international media organisations. This depiction reflects the belief that international media outlets are offering a platform for uncovering the truth and questioning the FG's narrative of events.

Finally, it was discovered that textual elements in the cartoons, including captions, inscriptions, speech bubbles and headlines, were strategically employed to reinforce the ideologies and socio-political messages conveyed in the cartoons, complementing the visual messages. In cartoon 11, for instance, the inscriptions on the shooting targets, such as *'Beard Gang'*, *'Dreadlocks'*, *'Phone Buff'*, *'Tattoo Guy'*, *'ICT Guy'*, and *'Well-Off'*, represent different social groups that have been targeted by the Nigerian police. The labels suggest that the Nigerian Police Force engages in the profiling and victimisation of individuals who possess certain physical attributes or who belong to specific social categories. Satire, sarcasm and irony were commonly used to criticise authority figures, satirise power imbalances and expose systemic issues. In cartoon 8, the speech bubble attributed to the former vice president of Nigeria, *'Aaand there you go. All former documents remain valid!'* adds a touch of irony to the cartoon. It suggests that, despite the restructuring, the issues associated with SARS might persist and the reforms may not adequately respond to public concerns. These cartoons effectively use concise and impactful language to convey complex socio-political messages.

## 8. Conclusion

The strategic use of visual metaphors, iconic representations, facial expressions, body language, colour and verbal resources allowed cartoonists to communicate the urgency for justice, to challenge authority, to call for social change and to mobilise support for the #EndSARS social movement. These cartoons not only serve as forms of protest but also act as vehicles for public discourse. They empower citizens to engage in critical discussions and reflect upon the socio-political realities of Nigeria.

By uncovering the ideologies and socio-political messages embedded in cartoons associated with the #EndSARS social movement, this study has contributed to a deeper understanding of the movement's objectives and challenges. The findings of this study can therefore inform linguists, media practitioners, activists and policymakers about the potential of visual communication to mobilise and shape public opinion. Further research in this domain could explore the reception and impact of these cartoons on different segments of society, in this way providing valuable insights for social movements and their communication strategies.

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