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DIGITAL PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL SYMBOLISM: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMMENTS ON OLUREMI TINUBU'S AKARA, CORN AND KULI KULI EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

This study examined digital public opinion and political symbolism through a textual analysis of social media comments on Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme. The study was motivated by the widespread online reactions that followed the First Lady's remarks promoting grant-supported micro-enterprises as a means of economic empowerment. Anchored on Symbolic Interactionism Theory and Framing Theory, the study investigated the dominant themes emerging from online discussions, the symbolic meanings attached to the programme, the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed by users, the dominant interpretive frames, and the implications of digital public opinion for political communication in Nigeria. A qualitative research approach was adopted using textual analysis. Ten purposively selected textual items comprising comments from X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp Status updates served as the units of analysis. The findings revealed that the dominant themes were economic hardship, criticism of government economic performance, distrust of public spending, perceived absence of visionary leadership, mockery and ridicule, ethnic interpretation, and limited support for the initiative. The study further found that the programme evolved into a political symbol of poverty, economic decline, failed governance, elite disconnect and low national ambition. Humour, satire, sarcasm, metaphors, hyperbole and emojis were widely employed to express public dissatisfaction and reconstruct political meanings. The dominant interpretive frames identified were economic hardship,

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government failure, public accountability, elite disconnect, political protest and humour. The study concludes that digital platforms have transformed citizens into active producers of political meaning, with social media discourse significantly shaping public perception and political legitimacy. It recommends that government communication should be more context-sensitive, transparent and responsive to citizens' socio-economic realities in order to enhance public trust and reduce negative symbolic interpretations.

Keywords: Digital public opinion, political symbolism, textual analysis, social media discourse, political communication.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital media has fundamentally transformed political communication across democratic societies. Unlike traditional media, where communication largely followed a one-way flow from political elites to citizens, social media facilitate interactive communication in which ordinary citizens actively interpret, evaluate and contest governmental actions. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram and YouTube have become significant public spheres where political narratives are negotiated, reconstructed and amplified (Chadwick, 2017; Loader et al., 2020).

Digital public opinion has consequently emerged as a central feature of contemporary governance. Public opinion is no longer measured solely through conventional surveys or electoral outcomes but increasingly through online conversations, hashtags, comment sections and digital activism. Social media users continuously evaluate public officials, government programmes and political events through comments, memes, satire and visual symbolism. These digital expressions often influence media agenda, shape political discourse and affect citizens' perceptions of government performance (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

Political symbolism constitutes another critical dimension of political communication. Political symbols include words, gestures, objects, images and narratives that represent broader political meanings beyond their literal interpretation. Edelman (1964) argues that politics largely operates through symbolic constructions because citizens interpret governmental actions based on meanings attached to political language rather than administrative intentions. Consequently, symbols become powerful tools through which governments communicate legitimacy, empathy, competence or national identity.

In contemporary political environments, social media have expanded the influence of political symbolism. Political messages are instantly reframed by online audiences through humour, parody, criticism and satire. A single statement may generate thousands of interpretations depending on prevailing socio-economic conditions and citizens' trust in political institutions. This demonstrates that political communication is increasingly shaped by audience participation rather than governmental control alone (Papacharissi, 2015).

Nigeria has experienced remarkable growth in digital political participation during the past decade. The widespread adoption of smartphones, declining internet costs and increased social media usage have enabled millions of Nigerians to participate actively in public discourse. Political campaigns, elections, policy announcements and governance issues frequently trend online, making digital platforms important spaces for agenda setting and opinion formation.

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Events such as the #EndSARS movement demonstrated the capacity of social media to mobilise public opinion and reshape national political conversations (Abubakar et al., 2022).

The relationship between digital communication and political legitimacy has become particularly significant amidst Nigeria's present economic challenges. Rising inflation, unemployment, declining purchasing power and increased living costs have heightened public sensitivity towards governmental communication. Consequently, official statements are frequently interpreted within broader socio-economic realities rather than as isolated policy announcements.

It was within this socio-economic context that Senator Oluremi Tinubu, Nigeria's First Lady, addressed journalists following a meeting of the Renewed Hope Initiative with wives of state governors. She explained that beneficiaries of the initiative received grants not loans to establish small businesses, mentioning ventures such as akara frying, roasted corn sales and kuli kuli production as examples of enterprises requiring relatively little start-up capital. She also highlighted broader interventions undertaken by the initiative in health, education, agriculture and social investment.

Although the programme was intended to promote entrepreneurship and self-reliance, the remarks generated immediate and widespread reactions across social media platforms. Thousands of users interpreted the statement differently. Some praised the emphasis on dignity of labour and recognised that such micro-enterprises have historically supported many Nigerian households. Others criticised the remarks as symbolic of governmental disconnection from the economic realities confronting many citizens.

These divergent reactions illustrate how digital public opinion extends beyond simple agreement or disagreement. Online users employed sarcasm, memes, humour, metaphors and emotionally charged language to construct competing narratives surrounding the empowerment programme. Such responses transformed what might have been a routine governmental communication into a significant national conversation concerning governance, economic hardship and political leadership.

The study therefore contributes to scholarship on political communication by examining how social media users constructed digital public opinion around Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme. Rather than evaluating the programme's economic effectiveness, the research focuses on how online audiences interpreted its symbolic meanings and what these interpretations reveal about contemporary political communication in Nigeria.

2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Political empowerment initiatives are generally introduced to improve citizens' welfare, reduce poverty and promote economic inclusion. However, within digitally connected societies, governmental programmes are increasingly evaluated through social media discourse, where public interpretation often differs substantially from official intentions. Consequently, political communication now extends beyond policy implementation to include symbolic meaning construction within digital environments.

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Recent reactions to Senator Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme demonstrate this phenomenon. While the initiative sought to encourage entrepreneurship through grant-supported micro-businesses, social media users produced highly polarised interpretations. Supporters framed the initiative as promoting dignity of labour and grassroots empowerment, whereas critics interpreted it as symbolising governmental insensitivity towards worsening economic conditions.

Despite the growing importance of digital public opinion in Nigeria, existing studies have concentrated primarily on election campaigns, misinformation, political participation and digital activism. Limited scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how online audiences construct symbolic meanings around governmental empowerment programmes through textual discourse. Furthermore, few studies have employed qualitative textual analysis to examine how humour, satire, metaphors and political symbolism influence public perceptions of government communication.

This gap limits scholarly understanding of the relationship between digital discourse and political legitimacy. Accordingly, this study investigates how social media users constructed public opinion regarding Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme and explores the symbolic meanings embedded within these online reactions.

2.1 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were :

1. To examine the dominant themes in social media comments concerning the empowerment programme;
2. To identify the symbolic meanings attached to the programme by online audiences;
3. To analyse the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed by social media users in expressing opinions;
4. To determine the dominant frames through which the programme was interpreted online; and
5. To examine the implications of digital public opinion for political communication and governmental legitimacy in Nigeria.

3.0 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

3.1 Digital Public Opinion

Public opinion refers to the collective attitudes, beliefs, evaluations and preferences expressed by members of the public regarding political issues, government policies, public officials and societal events. Traditionally, public opinion was measured through surveys, elections and opinion polls. However, the rapid diffusion of digital communication technologies has transformed the way public opinion is formed, expressed and analysed. Social media platforms have become interactive spaces where citizens publicly discuss political issues, challenge official narratives and influence one another's perceptions in real time (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

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Digital public opinion can be understood as the aggregation of views, sentiments and interpretations expressed through online interactions on social networking platforms, blogs, discussion forums and other digital communication channels. Unlike conventional public opinion, which is often captured periodically through surveys, digital public opinion is dynamic, continuous and participatory. Citizens react instantly to political events by posting comments, sharing content, creating memes and engaging in discussions that shape collective understanding of public affairs (Loader et al., 2020).

The emergence of digital public opinion reflects broader changes in democratic communication. Citizens are no longer passive recipients of information transmitted through traditional media. Instead, they actively participate in political discourse by producing content, responding to political actors and engaging in networked conversations. This participatory communication environment enhances opportunities for political engagement while simultaneously increasing the speed with which public narratives evolve (Chadwick, 2017).

Another important feature is the emotional dimension of online political communication. Research demonstrates that digital platforms encourage emotional expression because users often respond immediately to political events without extensive deliberation. Emotions such as anger, hope, disappointment, humour and empathy frequently shape public reactions and contribute to the viral spread of political content (Brady et al., 2017). Political discussions therefore involve not only rational evaluations but also affective responses that influence how policies are interpreted.

3.2 Political Symbolism

Political symbolism refers to the use of words, images, objects, narratives and actions that communicate meanings extending beyond their literal significance. Symbols enable political actors to simplify complex issues, evoke emotional responses and communicate values associated with leadership, authority and national identity. Rather than responding solely to objective realities, citizens frequently interpret politics through symbolic representations that influence their understanding of governmental actions (Edelman, 1964).

Political symbols function because they possess shared cultural meanings. A speech, policy initiative or public appearance may become symbolic of competence, compassion, accountability or disconnection depending on how citizens collectively interpret it. Consequently, political communication is not merely the transmission of information but also the construction of symbolic realities that shape public perception.

Social media have substantially expanded the influence of political symbolism. Digital platforms allow citizens to reinterpret political messages through humour, satire, memes, edited images and parody. A single political statement may rapidly acquire symbolic meanings that differ significantly from its original intention. These reinterpretations frequently spread across platforms, influencing broader public discourse.

Political symbolism is particularly important during periods of economic hardship. Citizens experiencing financial difficulties often evaluate governmental communication within broader socio-economic contexts. Consequently, statements intended to encourage entrepreneurship may instead become symbolic of perceived governmental attitudes toward poverty,

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employment and economic opportunity. This demonstrates that political symbolism is influenced by prevailing social conditions rather than official intentions alone.

The reactions to the Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme demonstrate this process. For some social media users, the programme symbolised grassroots empowerment and recognition of informal economic activities. For others, the initiative became a symbol of economic frustration, political elitism or inadequate policy responses to national economic challenges. These contrasting interpretations illustrate how political symbols remain contested rather than universally understood.

3.3 Social Media as a Digital Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere was introduced by Jürgen Habermas, who described it as a communicative arena where citizens discuss issues of common concern independent of governmental control (Habermas, 1989). Although Habermas developed the concept before the emergence of digital technologies, scholars argue that social media now perform many functions associated with the public sphere by facilitating political discussion, opinion exchange and civic participation.

Digital platforms provide opportunities for citizens to debate governmental policies, question political leaders and mobilise public support for social causes. Unlike traditional media, social media reduce barriers to participation because individuals require neither institutional affiliation nor professional journalistic experience to contribute to public discourse (Papacharissi, 2015).

However, scholars caution that digital public spheres differ significantly from Habermas's ideal. Online discussions are often characterised by misinformation, ideological polarisation, emotional expression and algorithmic amplification. These factors influence which opinions become visible and shape public understanding of political events (Chadwick, 2017).

Despite these limitations, social media remain influential arenas for democratic communication. Government officials increasingly monitor online discussions because digital public opinion affects political legitimacy, media coverage and electoral outcomes. Communication strategies are therefore increasingly designed with digital audiences in mind.

Comment sections beneath political news reports constitute important components of the digital public sphere. Users not only express individual opinions but also respond to one another, negotiate meanings and construct collective narratives. These interactions reveal how citizens interpret governmental communication beyond official policy documents or press releases.

3.4 Empirical Review

Isah, Ekhareafo and Asemah (2024) conducted a study entitled Textual Analysis of Political Othering in Select Nigerian Newspapers during the 2023 Elections Campaigns. The study examined how the Punch and Vanguard newspapers employed religious, ethnic and economic narratives during the 2023 presidential election campaigns. Using qualitative textual analysis, the researchers analysed newspaper reports to identify dominant discursive patterns and

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symbolic constructions. The findings revealed that political actors frequently utilised symbolic language and identity-based narratives to construct "us versus them" political identities, thereby reinforcing political polarisation. The study concluded that textual analysis provides deeper insights into media representations than frequency-based content analysis because it reveals hidden ideological meanings embedded in political discourse. The researchers recommended greater editorial responsibility in reporting politically sensitive issues. The study focused on newspaper discourse, whereas the present study investigates user-generated discourse on social media surrounding an empowerment programme.

Chukwuebuni, Isah, Godwin and Kadiri (2025) investigated Textual Analysis of Select X (Formerly Twitter) Users' Comments on the Dangote versus Phyna Family Saga. Employing qualitative textual analysis, the researchers examined how X users linguistically constructed sympathy, blame, outrage and accountability during the online controversy. The study found that users relied heavily on sarcasm, humour, emotional expressions, emojis and metaphors to negotiate public meaning. It concluded that digital discourse extends beyond opinion sharing to include the symbolic construction of public reality. The researchers recommended greater scholarly attention to digital textual analysis in communication research. Unlike their study, which focused on corporate crisis communication, the present study analyses political symbolism surrounding a government empowerment initiative.

Isah, Omale and Chukwuebuni (2024) examined the Implications of Social Media Disinformation and False Narratives for Public Opinion among Nigerian Electorate. The study adopted a qualitative desktop approach to investigate how false narratives circulating on social media influenced political attitudes and democratic participation. Findings indicated that repeated exposure to misleading digital narratives significantly altered public perception and reduced trust in democratic institutions. The study concluded that digital discourse substantially influences political legitimacy through the construction of public opinion. The researchers recommended strengthening digital literacy and institutional fact-checking. The study examined disinformation broadly, whereas the current research investigates symbolic interpretation within online comments.

Papacharissi (2015) examined the emergence of affective publics within digital political environments. Using qualitative analysis of online political engagement, the study found that emotions, sentiments and networked communication significantly influence political participation and opinion formation. The author concluded that social media facilitate emotional publics whose reactions often shape political discourse more strongly than formal institutional communication.

Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) investigated social media and political participation across Western democracies. Through comparative empirical analysis, the researchers found that online discussions influence political engagement, trust and public deliberation. Their findings demonstrated that digital conversations contribute significantly to the construction of public opinion.

Abubakar, Bashir and Omenugha (2022) examined social media and political participation in Nigeria. Using survey research, they found that digital platforms have become major spaces

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for political mobilisation, public deliberation and democratic participation. However, they also observed that digital discussions frequently become polarised and emotionally driven.

Loader, Vromen and Xenos (2020) explored social media's influence on civic engagement among young citizens. Using mixed methods, they found that online political participation increasingly shapes democratic discourse by enabling citizens to publicly negotiate political meanings rather than merely consuming political information.

Brady et al. (2017) analysed the relationship between emotions and the diffusion of political content on social media. Their quantitative analysis demonstrated that emotionally charged political messages spread significantly faster than neutral content. This finding explains why controversial political remarks often generate extensive online engagement and symbolic reinterpretation.

The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that digital platforms have transformed political communication from one-way information dissemination into an interactive process of meaning construction. Recent works by Isah and colleagues are particularly relevant because they show that textual analysis uncovers symbolic meanings, ideological positions and rhetorical strategies that traditional content analysis may overlook. Their studies on political othering, digital disinformation and textual analysis of X users' comments provide a strong methodological and conceptual foundation for examining social media reactions to Oluremi Tinubu's empowerment programme.

Despite the growing body of literature on political communication, media framing and textual analysis, no identified empirical study has specifically examined digital public opinion and political symbolism surrounding Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme. Existing studies largely focus on elections, political campaigns, media framing, disinformation and online political participation. Moreover, while Isah et al. have advanced textual analysis within Nigerian communication scholarship, there remains limited research exploring how citizens use humour, satire, metaphors, emojis and symbolic language to construct meanings around government-led empowerment initiatives. This study fills that gap by applying qualitative textual analysis to social media comments on the programme, thereby extending scholarship on digital political communication in Nigeria.

4.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Symbolic Interactionism Theory and Framing Theory. The two theories complement each other in explaining how social media users interpret political messages, construct meanings from political symbols and collectively shape digital public opinion.

4.1 Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Symbolic Interactionism was principally developed by George Herbert Mead and later expanded by Herbert Blumer. The theory argues that people do not merely react to objective reality but to the meanings they attach to objects, events, language and social interactions (Blumer, 1969).

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According to the theory, meanings emerge through social interaction and are continuously modified through interpretation. Political communication therefore becomes a symbolic process in which citizens interpret speeches, policy announcements, government programmes and public gestures based on their previous experiences, cultural orientation and socio-economic realities rather than on literal meanings alone.

Within digital environments, symbolic interaction becomes even more evident because online users actively negotiate meanings through comments, memes, emojis, satire, sarcasm and digital storytelling. Social media comments therefore represent symbolic interactions through which citizens collectively construct public opinion.

The reactions to Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme illustrate this theoretical position. Although the official communication presented the initiative as a poverty alleviation and entrepreneurship programme, many online users attached broader symbolic meanings to the initiative. For some, the programme represented grassroots economic empowerment and the dignity of labour. Others interpreted it as symbolising governmental insensitivity towards inflation, unemployment and declining purchasing power. These contrasting interpretations demonstrate that political communication derives meaning from audience interpretation rather than governmental intention.

The relevance of Symbolic Interactionism to this study lies in its explanation of how language, symbols and social interactions shape digital public opinion. The theory enables the researcher to analyse the symbolic meanings embedded within social media comments rather than restricting analysis to literal interpretations.

4.2 Framing Theory

Framing Theory was introduced by Erving Goffman and later adapted to media studies by Robert Entman. The theory argues that communication influences public understanding by emphasising certain aspects of reality while downplaying others (Entman, 1993).

Frames serve as interpretive structures through which audiences understand political events. Government officials, journalists and citizens all construct frames that define problems, assign responsibility, evaluate actors and suggest solutions.

Digital media have expanded framing processes because social media users are no longer passive consumers of media frames. Instead, they actively create competing frames through comments, hashtags, videos, memes and discussions. Consequently, political narratives become contested rather than centrally controlled.

In analysing the Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme, several dominant frames may emerge, including:

- Economic hardship frame
- Grassroots entrepreneurship frame
- Political satire frame
- Government accountability frame
- Poverty symbolism frame

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- Elite disconnect frame
- Women's empowerment frame

These competing frames influence how citizens evaluate governmental intentions and political legitimacy.

Framing Theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for understanding how online audiences reconstructed the empowerment programme into multiple political narratives that extended beyond its official objectives.

5.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using textual analysis as the primary research design. The choice of a qualitative approach was informed by the nature of the study, which sought to examine the meanings, symbols, narratives, linguistic patterns and ideological positions embedded in social media comments relating to Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme. Textual analysis was considered the most appropriate design because it enables the researcher to critically interpret texts beyond their literal meanings, focusing on how language constructs social reality, political perceptions and public opinion (Fairclough, 2015). Unlike quantitative content analysis, which emphasises frequencies and statistical relationships, textual analysis provides deeper insights into the symbolic and interpretive dimensions of communication by exploring how meanings are created and negotiated within texts (McKee, 2003). The adoption of textual analysis was further justified by the nature of social media discourse, where users frequently employ sarcasm, humour, satire, metaphors, emojis, political symbolism and other rhetorical devices to express opinions. The study therefore examined how social media users interpreted and constructed meanings around the empowerment programme through comments and WhatsApp Status updates. The study was also anchored on the interpretivist research paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed through communication and human interaction. From this perspective, the meanings attached to political events and government initiatives are not fixed but are continually negotiated through public discourse. Consequently, the study focused on understanding how online audiences collectively interpreted the empowerment programme rather than determining the objective correctness of those interpretations.

The population of the study comprised all publicly accessible social media comments and WhatsApp Status updates relating to Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme published between 24 June and 15 July 2026. The study focused on four digital platforms—X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp Statuses—because they generated considerable public discussion regarding the empowerment programme and attracted diverse participants, including journalists, political actors, civil society organisations and ordinary citizens. Given the dynamic and continuously changing nature of online discourse, it was impracticable to determine the exact population of relevant textual items across the selected platforms.

A purposive sample of ten (10) textual items was selected for the study. The sample comprised social media comments and WhatsApp Status updates that directly addressed Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme. The textual items were distributed

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across the selected platforms as follows: three (3) comments from X (formerly Twitter), three (3) comments from Facebook, two (2) comments from Instagram and two (2) WhatsApp Status updates, making a total of ten textual items. The sample size was considered adequate because qualitative textual analysis prioritises the richness, depth and interpretive value of textual data rather than statistical representativeness (Fairclough, 2015; McKee, 2003). Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich texts that contained substantive opinions, symbolic expressions, humour, satire, criticism or support relating to the empowerment programme. This sampling technique enabled the researcher to capture diverse perspectives across the selected platforms and facilitate a comprehensive interpretation of digital public opinion.

The unit of analysis for the study was the individual textual item, comprising either a single social media comment or a WhatsApp Status update. Each textual item was treated as an independent unit of analysis and assigned a unique identification code, namely X1–X3, FB1–FB3, IG1–IG2 and WS1–WS2, to facilitate organisation and analysis. Data collection commenced with the identification of relevant discussions on X, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp Statuses using keywords such as Oluremi Tinubu, Akara, Corn, Kuli Kuli and Renewed Hope Initiative. From the identified discussions, the researcher purposively selected ten textual items that best reflected the range of online reactions to the empowerment programme. Each selected textual item was documented, anonymised and coded for thematic analysis. The use of a relatively small but information-rich sample is consistent with qualitative textual analysis studies, including those of Isah et al. and McKee (2003), where emphasis is placed on close reading, interpretation and the exploration of symbolic meanings rather than large-scale quantitative analysis.

5.1 Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Social Media Comments

S/N	Name	Handle	Platform	Extracted Comment
1	ThegroupCEO	@PatrickAfia1	X	"...tell your husband to end insecurity, tame inflation and fix the economy... Nigerians don't want survival lectures..."
2	Emmanuel Obadiah	@obadiah14...	X	"She gave another billion... husband and wife lack simple administrative initiative..."
3	Soyannwo Fyn	@FiyinSoyannwo	X	"I expected a bigger vision for youth empowerment than celebrating akara empowerment."
4	new day	@NewDay29844	X	"She's talking about the money as if it's her father's money."
5	@Skood	@skood009	X	"Is the President's wife sharing her personal money or taxpayers' money?"
6	Dr Dahiru Machu	@dahiru_machu	X	"Is all these billions from her personal account or public treasury?"

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S/N	Name	Handle	Platform	Extracted Comment
7	Stand4UrNation NOT4Person.	(verified)	X	"Isn't it better to start such a business than stay idle?"
8	Emmytee	@EmmyteeTips	X	"First Lady is a joke 😂😂😂😂"
9	khaly_$	@ItxKhali	X	"Other nations are investing in technology while you're telling Nigerians to sell kuli-kuli."
10	U$HIE	@Shiski3	X	"This is part of the problem... this is the hope you can give poor women?"
11	Ademuyiwa	*@ademuyiwa*	X	"I pray APC supporters live long enough to witness the consequences of their political choice."
12	Ruth Osariemen	Facebook	Facebook	"It is not the akara; it is the economy."
13	evelynedirin Bezi family TV	Facebook	Facebook	"May all your family members sell akara and corn."
14	Joanh Ijechukwu	Facebook	Facebook	"How much positive impact can these trades have in a family of four?"
15	James Igona	Facebook	Facebook	"Is akara business what people will do to pay ₦2 million annual rent?"
16	Tony Hyacinth	Facebook	Facebook	"May your generations and children be reduced to selling akara..."
17	Caroline Lucky Esagbodje	Facebook	Facebook	"I will do this business if your children will be the first to start it."
18	Harold Ubani	Facebook	Facebook	"Are you selling kuli-kuli to feed your own family or mocking Nigerians?"
19	Omo Ola Eniola	Facebook	Facebook	"Akara for Yoruba women, roasting corn for Igbo women and kuli-kuli for Hausa women."
20	Ivie Mass Communication	WhatsApp Status	WhatsApp	"Make una no carry my market go another place o."
21	Estibel	WhatsApp Status	"Thrift Egg... Tinubu must go."	
22	kays_glam_look	Instagram	Instagram	"God please... we need help."

Research Question One: What dominant themes emerged?

Theme 1: Economic hardship and declining purchasing power

Most comments rejected the empowerment programme because it ignored prevailing economic realities.

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Examples

- Ruth Osariemen
- James Igona
- Joanh Ijechukwu
- PatrickAfia1

Illustrative quotation

"It is not the akara; it is the economy."

Theme 2: Criticism of government's economic performance

Many commenters shifted attention from entrepreneurship to inflation, insecurity and unemployment.

Examples

- PatrickAfia1
- Ademuyiwa
- Emmanuel Obadiah

Theme 3: Distrust of government spending

A recurring issue was whether public funds were being portrayed as personal generosity.

Examples

- @Skood
- Dr Dahiru Machu
- New Day

Representative quotation

"Is it her personal money or taxpayers' money?"

Theme 4: Perceived absence of visionary leadership

Users contrasted petty trading with industrialisation and technological development.

Examples

- Soyannwo Fyn
- Khaly_$

Theme 5: Mockery and ridicule

Numerous comments ridiculed the programme rather than engaging with its objectives.

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Examples

- Emmytee
- Tony Hyacinth
- Caroline Lucky

Theme 6: Ethnic interpretation

One comment ethnicised the empowerment package.

Example

- Omo Ola Eniola

Theme 7: Limited support

Only one visible comment openly defended the initiative.

Example

- Stand4UrNation NOT4Person.

Research Question Two: Political symbols attached to the programme

The programme evolved beyond a livelihood initiative into several political symbols.

Symbol	Meaning attached by users	Sample comments
Akara	Symbol of poverty	James Igona
Corn roasting	Government with low ambition	Soyannwo
Kuli-kuli	Failure of economic planning	Khaly_$
Akara Economy	Economic decline	Ruth Osariemen
Taxpayers' money	Government misuse of public resources	Skood
Public Treasury	Lack of transparency	Dr Dahiru
Tinubu must go	Political protest	WhatsApp status
Family business	Elitist hypocrisy	Caroline Lucky

Overall, akara, corn and kuli-kuli became symbols of:

- poverty
- economic hardship
- failed governance
- low national ambition
- political disconnect.

Research Question Three: Language, humour, satire, metaphors and emojis

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Humour

Examples

"First Lady is a joke"

"Make una no carry my market go another place."

Humour reduced the seriousness of the government's message.

Satire

Examples

"May all your family members sell akara."

"May your children be reduced to selling akara."

These sarcastic wishes criticised perceived elite hypocrisy.

Metaphors

Several metaphorical expressions emerged.

Expression	Interpretation
Akara economy	Collapsed economy
Survival lectures	Government detached from reality
Father's money	Misuse of public resources
Mocking Nigerians	Government insensitive to hardship
Heaven and earth with akara money	Past prosperity versus present hardship

Hyperbole

Examples

"She built heaven and earth with akara money."

"Tinubu collapsed the naira."

These exaggerations intensified criticism.

Humour through visual memes

The WhatsApp images mocked:

- Akara vendors
- thrift eggs

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- roadside businesses

Visual satire reinforced textual criticism.

Research Question Four: Dominant interpretive frames

Economic Hardship Frame

Dominant frame.

The programme was interpreted against inflation, hunger and unemployment.

Frequency: Very High

Government Failure Frame

Users portrayed the initiative as evidence of failed governance.

Examples

- Khaly
- PatrickAfia1
- Ademuyiwa

Public Accountability Frame

Questions centred on

- public funds
- transparency
- accountability

Examples

- Skood
- Dr Dahiru

Elite Disconnect Frame

The First Lady was portrayed as detached from ordinary Nigerians.

Examples

- Caroline Lucky
- Harold Ubani
- Tony Hyacinth

Political Protest Frame

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Some comments directly linked the initiative to opposition politics.

Examples

- Tinubu must go
- APC supporters
- consequences of political choice

Humour Frame

Users transformed the initiative into internet comedy.

Evidence

- memes
- jokes
- sarcasm
- parody

6.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research questions, the theoretical framework underpinning the study, and previous empirical studies reviewed in the literature.

Research Question One: What dominant themes emerged from social media comments regarding Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme?

The findings presented in Table 1 reveal that several dominant themes emerged from the social media discourse surrounding Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme. The most dominant theme was economic hardship and declining purchasing power. Comments such as Ruth Osariemen's statement, "It is not the akara; it is the economy," James Igona's concern about paying an annual rent of ₦2 million through akara business, and PatrickAfia1's appeal for the government to address inflation and insecurity demonstrate that the online audience interpreted the empowerment initiative within the broader context of Nigeria's prevailing economic challenges rather than as an isolated poverty alleviation intervention.

A second dominant theme was criticism of the government's economic performance. Rather than discussing entrepreneurship, several users redirected attention to inflation, unemployment, insecurity and governance. Emmanuel Obadiah criticised what he perceived as poor administrative initiatives, while Ademuyiwa linked the programme to wider political consequences. These reactions suggest that online users evaluated the initiative based on their overall assessment of government performance.

Another prominent theme concerned distrust of government spending and public accountability. Users such as @Skood, Dr Dahiru Machu and @NewDay questioned whether

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the grants originated from personal funds or taxpayers' money. Their comments indicate that transparency and accountability constituted significant concerns within the online discourse.

The analysis further revealed themes of perceived absence of visionary leadership, mockery and ridicule, ethnic interpretation, and limited support for the initiative. While Soyannwo Fyn and Khaly_$ contrasted the initiative with technological advancement in other countries, Tony Hyacinth and Caroline Lucky employed sarcasm to ridicule the programme. Omo Ola Eniola interpreted the initiative through ethnic lenses, while only one identifiable comment, from Stand4UrNation NOT4Person, openly defended the programme as a legitimate means of promoting entrepreneurship.

These findings corroborate the work of Abubakar et al. (2022), who found that Nigerian social media users frequently transform government policies into broader political debates concerning governance and accountability. Similarly, Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) argue that digital public opinion extends beyond policy evaluation to include broader democratic deliberation and political participation.

The findings are also consistent with Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics, which posits that online political discussions are driven not only by rational arguments but also by emotions such as frustration, anger, disappointment and hope. Many of the comments analysed in this study were emotionally charged, reflecting citizens' lived experiences of economic hardship.

Furthermore, the findings support the study by Isah, Ekhareafo and Asemah (2024), who observed that textual analysis reveals hidden ideological meanings embedded in political communication. Rather than responding solely to the content of the empowerment programme, users interpreted the initiative through wider political and economic realities.

The findings equally support the assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism Theory, which argues that meanings are socially constructed through interaction (Blumer, 1969). The empowerment programme acquired meanings that extended beyond entrepreneurship because social media users collectively negotiated its significance based on prevailing socio-economic experiences.

Research Question Two: What political symbols were attached to the empowerment programme by online audiences?

The findings indicate that social media users transformed the Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme into multiple political symbols that extended far beyond its intended objective.

As shown in the analysis, akara became a symbol of poverty and economic decline, corn roasting represented perceived low governmental ambition, while kuli-kuli symbolised failed economic planning. Expressions such as "Akara Economy" reflected citizens' perception of worsening economic conditions, whereas references to taxpayers' money and the public treasury symbolised concerns about transparency and accountability in the management of public resources. Similarly, the WhatsApp Status stating "Tinubu must go" transformed the empowerment initiative into a symbol of political resistance rather than economic intervention.

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These findings suggest that political symbols are not created solely by political actors but are reconstructed by citizens through digital discourse. The online audience assigned symbolic meanings to everyday commodities, transforming them into representations of poverty, governance failure, elite disconnect and declining national aspirations.

The findings agree with Edelman's (1964) proposition that politics operates largely through symbols whose meanings are determined by public interpretation rather than official intentions. Similarly, Isah et al. (2024) demonstrated that textual analysis uncovers symbolic constructions that are often invisible in quantitative analyses.

The findings further support Symbolic Interactionism Theory, which explains that political meanings emerge through continuous interaction among individuals. The comments analysed in this study demonstrate how social media users collectively reconstructed the empowerment initiative into broader political symbols reflecting governance, economic hardship and leadership.

Research Question Three: How did social media users employ language, humour, satire, metaphors and emojis in expressing their opinions?

The findings demonstrate that humour, satire, metaphors, exaggeration and emojis constituted important rhetorical strategies through which users expressed digital public opinion.

Humour appeared in comments such as "First Lady is a joke" and the WhatsApp Status "Make una no carry my market go another place o." Rather than merely entertaining audiences, these humorous expressions minimised the seriousness of the government's communication and increased its shareability across digital platforms.

Satirical expressions such as "May all your family members sell akara" and "May your children be reduced to selling akara" were employed to criticise perceived elite hypocrisy and governmental insensitivity. These sarcastic statements questioned whether political leaders would personally embrace the livelihoods they recommended to ordinary citizens.

Metaphorical expressions such as "Akara Economy," "survival lectures," "father's money," and "mocking Nigerians" transformed ordinary language into symbolic criticism of governance and economic management. Hyperbolic statements including "Tinubu collapsed the naira" intensified emotional reactions while reinforcing negative evaluations of government performance.

The use of emojis, internet slang and humorous memes further illustrates how contemporary political communication increasingly relies on multimodal forms of expression rather than conventional political language.

These findings are consistent with Chukwuebuni, Isah, Godwin and Kadiri (2025), who found that sarcasm, humour, emojis and metaphors play significant roles in constructing public meaning within digital discourse. Likewise, Brady et al. (2017) demonstrated that emotionally charged language spreads more rapidly across social media than neutral political communication.

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The findings also support Papacharissi's (2015) theory of affective publics, which argues that emotions drive online political engagement. The analysed comments illustrate that emotional language significantly influenced the construction of digital public opinion.

Research Question Four: Which interpretive frames dominated the online discourse surrounding the programme?

The findings indicate that the Economic Hardship Frame was the dominant interpretive frame. Most users evaluated the programme against prevailing inflation, unemployment, hunger and declining purchasing power rather than viewing it purely as an entrepreneurship initiative.

The Government Failure Frame also emerged strongly, with users such as PatrickAfia1, Khaly_$ and Ademuyiwa portraying the programme as evidence of broader governance failures. The Public Accountability Frame focused on questions regarding taxpayers' money, transparency and responsible use of public resources.

Another significant frame was the Elite Disconnect Frame, where users argued that political leaders were detached from the realities experienced by ordinary Nigerians. Comments by Caroline Lucky, Harold Ubani and Tony Hyacinth reflected this perception.

The discourse also revealed a Political Protest Frame, illustrated by comments advocating political change and criticising the ruling party. Finally, the Humour Frame transformed the programme into an object of satire through jokes, memes and parody.

These findings strongly support Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), which posits that audiences construct interpretive frameworks through which political events are understood. Rather than accepting the official frame of grassroots empowerment, online users developed competing frames that emphasised economic hardship, accountability and political dissatisfaction.

The findings also align with Loader, Vromen and Xenos (2020), who argue that digital platforms enable citizens to construct alternative political narratives independent of official communication. Likewise, Isah et al. (2024) found that textual analysis reveals competing ideological frames embedded within political discourse.

Research Question Five: What implications do the findings have for political communication and public perception of government empowerment initiatives?

The findings demonstrate that digital public opinion significantly shapes public perception of government programmes. Social media users no longer evaluate political initiatives solely on their stated objectives but interpret them within broader socio-economic and political contexts. Consequently, political communication is increasingly influenced by citizens' symbolic interpretations rather than governmental intentions alone.

The findings further indicate that political symbolism can substantially influence the success or failure of government communication. Once online audiences attached meanings such as poverty, failed governance and elite disconnect to the empowerment initiative, these symbolic interpretations became more influential than the programme's intended message of entrepreneurship.

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Another implication is that government communication strategies should recognise the participatory nature of digital media. Citizens actively negotiate, reinterpret and reconstruct official narratives through humour, satire, metaphors and symbolic language. Consequently, political communication must anticipate audience interpretation rather than focusing solely on message dissemination.

Overall, the study demonstrates that digital platforms have transformed citizens from passive recipients of political information into active producers of political meaning. The findings reinforce contemporary scholarship on digital political communication by showing that social media comments function as important sites for the construction of public opinion, political symbolism and democratic discourse.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined digital public opinion and political symbolism through a textual analysis of social media comments on Oluremi Tinubu's Akara, Corn and Kuli Kuli Empowerment Programme. The findings demonstrate that social media have evolved beyond platforms for information sharing into influential digital public spheres where citizens actively construct, negotiate and contest political meanings. Rather than evaluating the empowerment programme solely on its intended objective of promoting entrepreneurship among women and vulnerable groups, online users interpreted it through the broader realities of economic hardship, inflation, unemployment, governance challenges and declining public trust in government.

The textual analysis revealed that the dominant themes emerging from the comments included economic hardship, criticism of government economic performance, distrust of government spending, perceived absence of visionary leadership, humour and ridicule, ethnic interpretation and limited support for the initiative. These themes indicate that digital public opinion is shaped not only by government communication but also by citizens' socio-economic experiences and political orientations. The study further established that ordinary items such as akara, roasted corn and kuli-kuli acquired symbolic political meanings within digital discourse. Rather than being viewed merely as examples of small-scale entrepreneurial opportunities, they became symbols of poverty, economic decline, failed governance, elite disconnect and low national ambition. This finding confirms that political communication is highly symbolic and that audiences actively reconstruct government messages based on prevailing national realities.

The analysis also showed that humour, satire, sarcasm, metaphors, emojis and hyperbolic expressions constituted the dominant rhetorical devices employed by social media users in expressing their opinions. These linguistic strategies enabled users to criticise government actions, question political leadership and mobilise public sentiment in ways that were both engaging and persuasive. Furthermore, the study found that the online discourse was predominantly framed through economic hardship, government failure, public accountability, elite disconnect, political protest and humour, thereby illustrating the role of framing in shaping public interpretation of political events.

Drawing on Symbolic Interactionism Theory and Framing Theory, the study concludes that the meanings attached to government policies are not determined solely by political actors but are socially constructed through continuous interaction within digital communication spaces. Consequently, government empowerment initiatives are likely to be evaluated not only on their

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policy content but also on the symbolic meanings attached to them by online audiences. The study therefore concludes that effective political communication in the digital age requires governments to understand public sentiment, anticipate symbolic interpretations and communicate policies in ways that resonate with citizens' lived realities.

7.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government institutions should adopt more context-sensitive political communication strategies. Before introducing or publicising empowerment programmes, government officials should carefully consider prevailing socio-economic conditions and public sentiment. Messages should acknowledge citizens' realities and clearly communicate how such initiatives complement broader efforts to address inflation, unemployment and economic hardship.
2. Public officials and political communicators should strengthen strategic digital engagement. Government representatives should actively monitor social media conversations, respond promptly to public concerns and provide clarifications where necessary. Constructive engagement with online audiences can reduce misinformation, improve public trust and prevent negative symbolic interpretations from dominating public discourse.
3. Government empowerment programmes should be accompanied by clear evidence of impact and transparency. Since many participants questioned the source and management of funds, implementing agencies should regularly publish verifiable information on programme funding, beneficiary selection criteria, implementation processes and outcomes. Greater transparency will enhance accountability and strengthen public confidence in government initiatives.
4. Communication and media scholars should expand the use of qualitative textual analysis in political communication research. Future studies should investigate how humour, satire, memes, emojis and other digital communication practices shape public opinion across different government policies, political campaigns and national events. Such studies will deepen scholarly understanding of digital discourse and political symbolism in Nigeria.
5. Political leaders should complement micro-enterprise empowerment programmes with broader economic development initiatives. While promoting small businesses remains important, empowerment communication should be integrated with policies that support industrialisation, technological innovation, skills development, youth employment and sustainable economic growth. Presenting empowerment programmes within a broader development agenda is more likely to inspire public confidence and reduce negative symbolic interpretations.

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