

‘Taking one’s life is hard but...’: Language, Suicide and Nigerian Digital Narratives

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Abstract

The spate of suicide, especially among young people, has become a global concern. In addition, suicide acts elicit diverse reactions and emotions. This study examines the representations of suicide and the perceptions of suicide victims by Nigerian social media users. Data, which were purposively retrieved between September, 2019 and February, 2020 from Facebook through keyword searches of reports and posts on suicide, were analysed in line with the tenets of the appraisal theory. These were identified and discussed alongside the identified themes in the suicide notes. Specifically, 28 excerpts from five suicide notes and 55 excerpts from the comments to the suicide posts were culled purposively and discussed. These excerpts were used in the systematic analysis of suicide discourse, and in the presentation of predominant appraisal patterns in the narratives. The study concludes that language is critical in suicide narratives and that the perceptions of digital habitués vary.

Keywords: Suicide, Digital Discourse, Victimhood, Appraisal theory, Language, Suicide Note

Introduction

Social media platforms have revolutionised human sociality, through the affordance of visibility for hitherto underrepresented demographics as well as globalising the space through its democratisation of identities and voices online. These platforms have also become spaces where users create imagined communities and express their inner emotions. Of course, the social media space has also been exploited by users with unwholesome intentions (Onanuga and Taiwo, 2021). Consequently, scholars have been interested in the interrogation

of digital attitudes and behaviours, and how these manifest in and influence users beyond the digital space. In addition, questions surrounding how users interact online as well as their appropriation of the space for hitherto unconventional practices have been examined. Beyond the sociology of these practices, language has been found to play critical roles within such contexts. In this study, we are interested in linguistic representations and practices as identifiable in suicide notes and comments which serve as reactions to those notes online. We recognise that language use on social media not only shape people's views, opinions and actions, they also reveal users' emotional state and attitudes. We posit that through the analysis of suicide notes as well as the accompanying comments to such posts, one can get insights into discourses related to suicidal behaviours.

A cursory engagement of posts on social media platforms in Nigeria, including the very popular Facebook which is the data source for this study, reveal significant increase in the reports of youth suicide. For instance, a Niger Delta University (NDU) student who committed suicide for failing his medical examinations, dropped a hint about his suicidal intention through his WhatsApp status update before committing suicide on May 15, 2019. Another victim, a twenty two-year old student who was in his final year in the department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN), committed suicide on May 13, 2019 after a long battle with mental illness. Before his death, he had gone on Facebook to appreciate one of his lecturers who, he noted, took time out to assist him during his troubles. This student then penned his suicide notes, posted same on his Facebook page, thereafter went into an uncompleted building where he subsequently ended his life. There have also been reported escalations of suicidal intents on Twitter, so much so that there are Twitter handles of health management experts who are often tagged once some of such suicidal tweets are encountered. It must be borne in mind that Facebook enjoys remarkable use in Nigeria. Indeed, among the well-patronised social media platforms, Facebook has consistently maintained the highest number of users (Statcounter, 2022). It is thus unsurprising that

some young suicide victims use the platform for the dissemination of their experiences. For the study therefore, we harvest such suicide posts and incorporate the comments of other users in order to examine their reactions to such actions.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2019) identifies suicide as a global phenomenon, one which accounted for 1.4% of all deaths worldwide, making it the 18th leading cause of death globally. The health organisation however related the incidents of suicides to development indices, with 79% of suicides occurring in low- and middle-income countries. These figures suggest that about 800,000 people die due to suicide every year, making it a person every 40 seconds. Statistics from the WHO in 2018 also indicate that, for each adult who died by suicide, there may have been more than 20 others attempting suicide. Kaslow (2014) defines suicide as death caused by self-directed injurious behaviour with the intent to die. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) asserts that suicide is death caused by injuring oneself with the intent to die. It must be noted that suicidal actions not only affect the victim. They also have implications on the well-being of the immediate family members, friends and extended community. According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), the economic toll of suicide on the society is immense due to the deaths of people who otherwise might have contributed positively to national development. Kaslow (2014) identifies some personal predisposing factors for suicide. These include losses (e.g., death, divorce, separation, broken relationship), lack of self-esteem, loss of interest in friends, hobbies, or activities previously enjoyed, family history of suicide, mental health challenge, witnessing family violence, child abuse or neglect, lack of social support, and sense of isolation. Added to these are external factors like state of the economy, online bullying, and other forms of societal pressures (WHO, 2019).

Suicide victims use various means to kill themselves. What we however found, although disconcerting, is that a number of these victims actually write suicide notes before they venture into suicide. Suicide notes are documentations provided by victims as a revelation of their intention to commit suicide. Usually, the

notes catalogue the prevailing circumstances around the victim as well as what triggered the decision to commit suicide. Many of these notes conclude with emotional renditions, often recognising that they might have betrayed some people's trust and expectations through their actions and expressing hope that the suicide rids them of the challenges which pushed them to taking their own lives. Schneidman (1996) outlined some common features existent in suicide notes. These commonalities show that suicide is to get a solution, it is the stoppage of consciousness and the common motivation of suicide is mental pain, etc. Some of these suicide notes get posted online by the victims, thus drawing attention to their decisions. The notes no doubt generate civic engagements and elicit multiple forms of reactions. Samples of these notes as put online alongside the comments by other social media platform user constitute the data for the current study. We pay particular attention to language use within this form of discourse, and examine how language and digital behaviours intersect. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- a) identify how suicide victims use language on Nigerian social media;
- b) analyze and observe peculiar patterns of language use in suicide notes on social media;
- c) discuss Nigerians' social media users' attitudes to suicide narratives; and,
- d) contextualise the linguistic and attitudinal perspectives to suicide within the larger Nigerian realities.

Suicide Discourse and Digital Media

The interrogation of the nexus of social media and suicide is a relatively recent scholarly endeavour. In these academic engagements, attention has been paid to suicide and suicide-related behaviours as well as how social media is appropriated in suicide. In addition, social media users' perception of suicide and suicide victims constitute the interest of the inquiries. A recurring observation from these studies is that there is increased evidence that the use of social media platforms correlate positively with the upsurge in the incidence of suicide (Royal Society for Public

Health, 2017). These studies however also recognise that the spate of suicide and its reportage online has stimulated the dissemination of health-related issues, mental health, violence and abuse as well as spawned advocacies against suicide and suicide-ideation on social media platforms. Despite the traditional widespread discrimination and stigmatisation of suicide and the prevailing negative attitudes to suicide victims, suicides have become more commonplace in the Nigerian environment within which the current study is domiciled. Even more troubling is its surging trend among young people. Adduced as the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year olds globally (WHO 2019), it would seem that young Nigerians are not exempted, with the social media becoming a choice platform for the dissemination of suicide news.

Several studies have engaged the intersection of and relationship between language, the digital space and suicide. Some of these studies have made use of the internet as a data mine as internet users were found to have used the media as a channel to post suicide notes or suicide-related contents on the internet. Chen, Chai, Zhang and Wang (2014) used a data mining system to understand teen suicide trend in China with data from Chinese web pages and blogs. Li, Chau, Yip and Wong (2014) and Cheng, Kwok, Zhu, Guang and Yip (2015) also specifically examine language patterns and blog posting frequency to predict signs of suicidal processes among Chinese youths. Lv, Li, Liu and Zhu (2015) focuses on posts of Korean adolescents and identifies suicide-related words such as depression, victims of bullying, concern about illness and financial hardship in the database. Cultural differences of suicide notes have also been explored. One such study is the one in which the themes in the suicide notes from Turkey and United States were compared. It was shown that there are more shared elements when compared to culture-specific elements. However, in the study, it was found that “indirect expressions” were prominent in the notes from Turkey (Leenars et al, 2010). Furini and Menegoni (2018) explore the intersection of public health and social media through the analysis of conversations. Using Facebook as data source, the study identifies that language use and linguistic choices are revelatory of the

emotive states of respondents and belong to predefined lexical categories (affective, social, medial and biological) and subcategories.

Contextualising the Data: Suicide in Nigeria

Since the liberalisation of the mobile telephony landscape in Nigeria following the return to democratic dispensation in 1999, the Internet and social media platforms have become widespread in use among Nigerians. Some of the popular applications are *WhatsApp*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram* and *YouTube*, and these are avenues for entertainment and social interaction. As Mihailidis (2014) observes, social media platforms are also increasingly being integrated into many other aspects of peoples' daily activities, as a result of the plethora of applications available for use on the now ubiquitous mobile devices. The stratospheric rise in human sociality online has also given way to the manipulation of digital affordances even in the dissemination of information about mental health and wellbeing (McClellan, Ali, Mutter, Kroutil and Landwehr, 2017). However, while many of these personal wellbeing posts encourage positive health outcomes, some others contain disturbing suicidal messages, particularly the ones being generated and shared by adolescents.

According to the Spectator Index (2018), Nigeria is placed fifth in the world with 15 suicides in every 100,000 people¹. This shows a worsening case as the country had never posted a figure as high since the records started in 2000, especially as the figure by the WHO for 2016 showed 9.5 per 100,000 people. Some existing studies on suicide in Nigeria have brought up noteworthy findings. For instance, Omigbodun, Dogra and Esan (2008), in a study on the prevalence and correlates of suicidal behaviour among adolescents in Southwest Nigeria, affirmed that suicide was indeed on the rise, especially among young people. The study noted that up to 12% of those who actually ideated suicide went ahead with suicide attempts. The rise in suicide was blamed on the worsening economic conditions as well as the absence of

¹ <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/reports/spectator-index-tweet-exaggerates-nigerias-suicide-rate>

proper attention to mental health issues. In addition, Nwosu and Odesanmi (2001) examined the pattern of suicide in Ile-Ife, Nigeria and reported that in Ife, the suicide rate is 0.4 per 100,000, with increased occurrences in males at a ratio 3.6 to 1. The majority of the suicide studied was committed through the use of an accessible yet deadly pesticides, Gammalin 20 and Phosphorus, and local Dane guns. More recently, Sniper has overtaken Gammalin 20 and Phosphorus as the go-to poisons for suicide acts among young Nigerians.

Methods

The study adopts descriptive research design which involves purposive data sampling. Purposive sampling as projected in this study enables a focused data collection especially in view of the nature of suicide which is not an everyday occurrence which again is underreported even on social media. The focus is solely on Facebook posts with suicide notes from suicide victims alongside the comments by other users. Facebook became the choicest media for this study 28 excerpts from five suicide notes and 55 excerpts from the comments to the suicide posts were culled and discussed. These were retrieved through keyword searches on suicide-related contents between September, 2019 and February, 2020. In view of the sensitivity of the topic under discussion and to protect the identities of concerned users whose comments are used, anonymised screenshots of posts and comments from these data are complemented with textual excerpts.

The language use in these narratives is analysed with attention paid to the tenets of Appraisal Theory by Martins and White 2005. The Appraisal theory 'engages issues of speaker/writer evaluation, certainty, commitment and knowledge, and [...] how the textual voice positions itself with respect to other voices and other positions in the discourse'. According to Martin and White (2005: 94 Please use APA 7th edition. This style is dated.), this theoretical orientation avails the interrogation of 'meanings in context and towards rhetorical effects rather than towards grammatical forms'. Consequently, through such application, a researcher can identify the ways through which language users construct textual character and

constitute interpersonal positioning and relationships (Martin & White, 2005). In addition, Martin (2000: 143) states that appraisal enables the examination of 'how speakers can exploit different ranges of appraisal to construct particular personae for themselves'. The ultimate aim is geared towards the negotiation and achievement of solidarity among interlocutors. There are three categories that are identified in Appraisal Theory, these are: Attitude, Engagement and Graduation. Each of these is further divided into subcategories. Attitude is subdivided into: Affect, Judgement and Appreciation. Engagement is subdivided into Monogloss and Heterogloss and Graduation into: Force and Focus. The theoretical concepts used from Appraisal Theory are: *affect, appreciation, Monogloss, heterogloss, force-intensify*, as these sub-categories have provenance in the data. These are identified and discussed alongside the identified themes in the suicide notes.

Data Analysis and Discussion

In what follows, there is a linguistic analysis of suicide notes on posts by victims as well as the accompanying comments on such posts. In presenting the data, the suicide notes and the comments have been numbered. These excerpts are discussed in line with the identifiable themes from the data alongside the application of the earlier identified sub-categories from the Appraisal theory. We first present and discuss data from the victims' suicide notes, using representative excerpts. After this, the comments on these notes by other users are examined.

Why Suicide is an Option: Analysing Victimhood in Nigerian Suicide Notes

In what follows, we interrogate how language is used by victims in their suicide notes. An overt linguistic realisation across the texts are attempts towards justification of suicide. Through the simple and direct sentence forms identifiable in the notes, we encounter the victims providing reasons for their actions. Oftentimes, these narratives are couched in apologetic language and usually signal the introduction to the suicide notes. Exemplifying excerpts from the notes are:

- Excerpt 1:** Suicide Note. Forgive me. In case you are the one who found the body...
- Excerpt 2:** I have chosen my own path... I will miss you all.
- Excerpt 3:** Please help me stand by my mother. She's the reason why i have lived this far. Thank you. To my loved ones.
- Excerpt 4:** THE LIGHT IS GRADUALLY DIMMING OUT...
- Excerpt 5:** I did this because I see nothing worth living for in this world.

In Excerpt 1, the victim is contrite as indicated by the declarative – forgive me – whereas in Excerpt 2, the victim is more assertive of their decision to take their life, affirming that suicide is their 'path'. Excerpt 3 recognises the influence of their mother in the delay of the eventuality of suicide and pleads for support for the mother. Excerpt 4 records the last moments of the victim and stands out stylistically in its use of capital letters and the ellipses. As with all incidents of suicide, Excerpt 5 provides the justification, stating that suicide is necessary as there was 'nothing worth living for'. In these varied excerpts, the victims express their thoughts, desires and intentions in their suicides notes and shared these online (Moreno & Sanchez, 2012). These realisations also conform to Lenhart, Purcell, Smith and Zickhr's (2010), and Dunlop, More and Romer's (2011) assertion that young people make frequent use of digital media, and on these platforms they are expressive of their emotional states.

Affect: Emotion and Suicide Victimhood in Nigerian Suicide Notes

Affect is a kind of emotional response based on behaviour, text and phenomenon (Martin & White 2005) and can be expressed explicitly with negative or positive sense of emotional words such as love/hate, happy/sad, joy/despair, worried/confident etc. In the data for this study, we focus on the expression of regret and affection for loved ones. These are subsequently discussed:

Expression of Regret

Emotions are psychological or mental feelings, and we identify regret as an emotional outpour in the data. Emotion of regret, denoted through expression of remorse, sadness, disappointment, etc., are rife across the victims' suicide notes. Filial or family ties recur in the expression of regret as the victims recognise the pains that their family members and friends would go through. Oftentimes, the victims emotionally request forgiveness and repentance, hoping that the psychological and social realities which pushed them over the edge had not manifested. Justifying excerpts are provided thus:

Excerpt 6: Forgive me

Excerpt 7: I am really sorry

Excerpt 8: Bye. I wish this didn't happen

Excerpt 9: Mummy, please don't cry

Excerpt 10: ...why me?

Excerpts 6 and 7 are expressive of the victims' feeling of regret, one which they relay to their family members. 'Forgive me' and 'I am really sorry' contextualise the decision to commit suicide as a difficult one for the victims. Excerpt 8 betrays the difficulty of the victim's decision while in Excerpt 9, the victim acknowledges filial emotion as they request that their mother should not cry. Excerpt 10 is however rhetorical as the victim attempts to come to the acceptance of their decision to take their life. McClelland, Reicher and Booth (2000) aver that suicide notes as means of communication reflect the relationships between suicide victims and their relatives while the expression of regret as an emotion serves as an identification of the severity of suicide on the victims.

Affection for Loved Ones

Affection for loved ones manifests significantly in suicide notes. Language use within this context shows an acknowledgement of existent relationship between the victims and their loved ones. During their last moments, the victims document and reiterate their affection for their loved ones, affirming that while victims may enjoy close and functional family ties, those may not be

enough to dissuade them from taking their lives. This is because, in many cases, victims of suicide are also sufferers of depression and they often do not speak out or seek professional assistance. It is therefore unsurprising that many suicide notes draw attention to human relationships before sometimes detailing the reasons or motives for suicide (McClelland, Reicher & Booth, 2000). These are shown in the excerpts below:

Excerpt 11: I will miss you mum. Mummy, please
don't cry

Excerpt 12: I will miss you all

Excerpt 13: Mummy I love you. Daddy I love you

Excerpt 14: Forgive me. In case you are the one who
found the body, I am really sorry

Excerpt 15: I will miss you mum...

Excerpt 16: I LOVE YOU GUYS

According to Scourfield, Fincham, Langer and Shiner (2012), suicide victims are usually very emotive in their suicide notes. These emotional outbursts reveal the cordiality and relationship between victims and their close relatives. 'Miss' and 'love' are the two most common expressions used in conveying affection in the data. Excerpts 11 and 12 indicate that the victims will miss their relatives and, across the excerpts, we find references to maternal love. In Excerpt 13, the victim reveals their family background as they reference the love they have for their parents. The victim in Excerpt 14 is however apologetic to whoever it is who finds their body and who has to bear the burden of breaking the news of the suicide. Excerpts 15 and 16 also express filial emotions. It is necessary to recognise that these emotions are by implication apologies and resonate with Foster's (2003) observation that apologies are common in suicide notes. These expressions of emotional outburst mark the anticipated separation between the suicide victims and their loved ones due to the decision of the victims to end their lives.

Monogloss: Taking the Blame

Monogloss occurs when there are no references to other viewpoints in a text or discourse, that is, the suicide victims' will to die is not attached to any identified cause. In the data, monogloss is realized through expressions that indicate self-determination, silencing the presence of cause-effect in the death of the victims. This resonates with Tunram and Ambade's (2016: 256) definition of suicide notes as "the notes where the victim has documented the intention to terminate one's own life". The suicide victims' self-determination to end their lives manifest in the excerpts below:

Excerpt 17: I have chosen Jo Nkeitai's poem as my suicide note.

Excerpt 18: I have chosen my own path

Excerpt 19: I am going. I need to go...

Excerpt 20: Thoughts of death will come in the scene

The profuse realization of the personal pronoun 'I' places the burden of suicide on the victims. This is sustained with the identification of lexical items like 'chosen', 'suicide', 'path', 'going', 'to go' and 'death' in the excerpts. These invigorate the narratives around death and reference the determination of the victims to end their lives. To these victims, death equals self-actualization, validating Bion's (1959) submission that suicide is not mere ideation but an acting out of what was purposed in the mind of the victim.

Heterogloss (Force-Intensify): Extending the Blame

Heterogloss, unlike Monogloss, occurs when there are references to other viewpoints in a text (White, 2001). In this context, suicide victims externalise the prevailing circumstances which necessitate their actions. A major realisation is identifiable through force-intensify. Force involves the degree of intensity as well as emphasis in how language users express themselves in discourse encounters (Martin & White, 2008). In the notes, the suicide victims emphatically express their frustrations with life. They indicate their exhaustion with living, revealing that they had reached their breaking points. Kohut and Wolf (1978:5) affirm

that even in the absence of other causative factors such as guilt or aggression, “a feeling of inner deadness” may result in suicide.

Excerpt 21: I’ve tried my best. I’ve tried all I could.

Excerpt 22: he becomes helpless...

Excerpt 23: he's among people, he still feels lonely...

Excerpt 24: Life can be truly unfair.

Excerpt 25: Check yourself before it makes you feel worried.

From Excerpt 21, one identifies the struggle for endurance to withstand challenges. However, the victim has been pushed to the limit and could no longer endure. If Excerpts 22 shows hopelessness in trying to keep on living, Excerpt 23 depicts unconquerable loneliness as a result of personal isolation while Excerpt 24 expresses the worthlessness of living and draws attention to the unfairness of daily existence with its accompanying challenges. Excerpt 25 is admonitory, advising others to be attentive to their mental health. In these excerpts, the victims signal the limitations of their abilities to cope. To the victims, suicide is the only way by which they can end their miseries, as identifiable below:

Excerpt 26: I am empty.

Excerpt 27: I did this because I see nothing worth living for.

Excerpt 28: When a man's life is unstable, worried, downcast and destabilised, things he does right before will become wrong no matter the best he puts in. he loses focus and strength; he becomes unhappy and angry at everything even if he tries to wear a smiling face.

These victims document the reason for their actions. In fact, these victims do not believe that they might be salvaged, especially as long as the contextual realities which predispose them to suicide ideation persist. Emile Durkheim (1897) regards suicide-

predisposing factors as social elements. Social elements are contributory factors around the victim which may aid suicide. In Nigeria, these vary from socio-economic factors to cultural and psychological as well as clinical factors. Although McClland et al (2000) assert that trading blames within suicide narratives may have negative effects on the recipient of suicide notes, Ho, Yip, Chiu & Halliday (1998) believe that suicide notes can indeed be therapeutic, and therein is the role of language. The linguistic context shows the psychological state of mind of the victims. Consequently, 'I am empty', 'I see nothing worth living for', and 'becomes unhappy and angry at everything' represent mental fatigue and exhaustion as a result of external pressures. These led to self-resignation and, ultimately, suicide.

Medicine after Death: Commenters' Linguistic Representation of Suicide

The analysis of comments is to examine the perspectives of other digital habitués to the suicide notes. The digital space continues to afford users the opportunity of expressing their opinions on issues and events. As done in the preceding discussions, the comments are analysed with reliance on Appraisal theory concepts, spanning *Affect* – Prayers and wishes for the victim, Mutual feeling with the victim (pact), Concerns for the victims, *Judgment* – Judgmental opinions of life and after-life, Verbal abuse and Judgments, *Appreciation* – Life and spiritual views on the value of life, General views on the appreciation of life, Suicide and others, *Heterogloss* – Context of suicide, *Force-Intensify* – reasons adduced to suicide, *Focus-Strengthen* – Resolution against suicide.

Affect: Expressing Solidary and Concern for Suicide Victims

Affect involves the display of emotion for the suicide victims. This is expressed in form of heart-felt prayers and individual wishes for the victims as shown below:

Excerpt 29: May God Almighty forgive his sins and rest his soul.

Excerpt 30: I pray you find happiness and comfort wherever you are.

Excerpt 31: he needs the rest though.
Excerpt 32: Rest in perfect peace
Excerpt 33: ... rip gentle soul rest in peace...
Excerpt 34: ...I hope you somehow find the answers
you seek...Adios...Rest in peace
Excerpt 35: ...rest on old young man
Excerpt 36: Rip bro...

Within many cultures, it is customary to say prayers for the dead. These prayers signal sympathy and emotion. These are not surprising realisations since the victims in these study are young people who are in their primes as expressed in the excerpts 'rest on old young man' and 'Rip bro'. These excerpts manifest solidarity. Furthermore, there were identified portrayals of what commenters share with the suicide victims. Some of the commenters reveal their fight with being suicidal while others reference their ongoing challenges to cope with their existential realities:

Excerpt 37: ive seen my second half we share
almost the same emotions, sadness,
and passion am coming to see you
soon brother am coming to join you
wherever you are.
Excerpt 38: Never hit a man when he is down.
What did we do to you to deserve
this? All we want is peace. We are
trying our best to stay here. Smh
Excerpt 39: Me too feel like ending it, no joy
everything about me is hatred...
Excerpt 40: No offence but keep your beliefs to
yourself... who told you that
late_didn't seek God...since I have
been seeking him did he answer? No
he didn't. I don't need your religion

The theme identified in the foregoing excerpts show mutuality with the suicide victims. The commenters empathize with the

psychological pain and dejection of the victims. The use of ‘we’ and ‘too’ aptly reveal an in-group identity and indicate the like-mindedness of the victims and the commenters. These commenters also allude to the prevailing realities in Nigeria in terms of economic conditions and social relationships and document how tough daily life is. The expressiveness afforded by the digital space shows that many commenters also have suicide tendencies already. In fact, the digital space may also accentuate and provoke the achievement of suicide tendencies in susceptible individuals (Burke, 2017). Commenters also indicate concern for the victims of suicides. This attitude may be regarded as an offshoot of shared socio-economic realities. Exemplifying excerpts are:

Excerpt 41: My brother and my beloved friend,
your death is still a dream to me and I
sincerely I do not want to wake up to
its reality. I am sorry my brother...I am
deeply sorry...

Excerpt 42: I really feel sorry for him...”, “so
you’re not alive to watch champions
league today is a pity

Excerpt 43: I hope you get the new body you so
desired

Excerpt 44: Rest on, I believe no one will break
your heart in heaven

Excerpt 45: oh so sad this will be a huge lost to the
family

Excerpt 46: ...sorry for his parent.

These excerpts span a diversity of emotive expressions. Commenters show concerns for the dead wishing them better lives in future – *I hope you get the new body you so desired*, and *Rest on, I believe no one will break your heart in heaven*. There are also references to the family members of victims – *a huge lost (sic) to the family* and *sorry for his parent*. One further encounters the personalisation of sorrow – *so you’re not alive to watch*

champions league today is a pity – revealing the commenter's closeness to the victim.

Judgment

Judgment refers to attitudes towards behaviour. The evaluation may be judged positively or negatively based on social norms and social constraints. Manifestations of judgment in the suicide discourse focus on opinions of life and the after-life, as well as abuse of suicidal action. These perceptions by Nigeria social media users are exposed in the excerpts below:

- Excerpt 47:** ...taking your life can't isn't the best
- Excerpt 48:** ...my argument is there is no challenge that worth your life
- Excerpt 49:** SUICIDE IS NEVA A SOLUTION 2 ANY PROBLEM. NOTHING IS WORTH DYING ...SUICIDE ONLT TKS PPLE DIRECT TO HELL FIRE WHICH IS THE WORST
- Excerpt 50:** where ever ...he is right now he will be regretting his action
- Excerpt 51:** for no reason will you think of taking your life...mercy did not found him and no RIP for him.
- Excerpt 52:** bt killing urself only makes tins worst fr u in d oda world"
- Excerpt 53:** For those of you that are posting rip, 4get it, dis mumu can't find any peaceful place to rest.
- Excerpt 54:** This guy soul no fit rest in peace at all...

Negative evaluation and judgment of suicide are usually hinged on spiritual/religious beliefs as well as cultural ethics of what is right or wrong (Gyekye, 2010). These often culminate in the use of abusive expression in responding to the reality of suicide. Commenters express the perception that no problem should push anyone to taking their life – *my argument is there is no challenge*

that worth your life. This viewpoint resonates across the excerpts. Beyond castigating the victims for taking their lives, there are also judgments of the after-life. The belief is that taking one's life denies a person peace and anticipated rest in the afterlife, as evoked in 'bt killing urself only makes tins worst fr u in d oda world' and 'SUICIDE ONLT TKS PPLE DIRECT TO HELL FIRE WHICH IS THE WORST'. It is important to contextually situate these realisations. Nigeria main religions being Christianity and Islam frown at suicide. Even in adversity, people are expected to either accept their pre-destined fate or in order to escape the scourge, pray to their God who is believed to have the ability to turn the tides positively. Therefore, committing suicide is represented as going against the will of God.

The place of religion and spirituality is suffusing in the narratives, and these assist in identifying the appreciation of or premium placed on human life.

Excerpt 55: my brother don't be deceive (sic) after death is judgment, where u will spend eternity is important, when u take your life what explanation will you give to your maker...

Excerpt 56: if you think suicide is the best option then I think you've not found your purpose in life...I couldn't blame him because he was an atheist...

Excerpt 57: so if you are here trying to do same better have a second thought cos Devil only came to kill and destroy...

Excerpt 58: you shouldn't have taken the precious life God gave you.

The references to 'eternity', 'maker', 'atheist', 'Devil', 'precious life' and 'God' provide ample context to the place of judgment and afterlife in Nigerian suicide narratives. The belief in the afterlife thus motivates the commenter to demand: what explanation will you give to your maker? Of course, confounding circumstances like suicide are also branded as one of the works of

the Devil and lies at the heart of the declaration: Devil only came to kill and destroy. Suicide is therefore seen as unnatural and unhealthy.

Focus-Strengthen

Focus implies giving prominence to meaning (Martin & White, 2008). In other words, when a text is given focus, it becomes emphatic and worthy of attention. One of such manifestations in the data is the repeated identification of the expression 'suicide not an option'. This can be perceived as a stance against suicide and a way for the commenters to express their displeasure on suicide victims. These are realised in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 59: suicide is not the solution

Excerpt 60: suicide_is_not_an_option.

Excerpt 61: I have seen people more depressed.
Suicide was never an option.

Excerpt 62: suicide is not the best solution to a
problem...

Excerpt 63: whichever way suicide is not the best
option...

Excerpt 64: for you die, you die a coward, if you
live you are brave.

These excerpts emphasize and reiterate a rejection of suicide. Suicide is portrayed as a cowardly action and one which does not resolve the challenges which the victims intend to escape from. Indeed, suicide is presented as an action which further creates problems for the victims' families while also leaving them with the challenge of finding closure after such an unwelcome event. To these commenters, everyone faces difficulties. However, speaking out and staying strong may aid the prospective victims in turning the corner. One may thus read these commenters as being pro-life.

Heterogloss

The examination of heterogloss in the comments to suicide notes indicate that being suicidal is not isolated or without a cause.

Indeed, causes of suicide are traceable to predisposing factors. The commenters therefore provide valuable context to the narratives. Context is a vital part of linguistic analysis and, in this case, integral to understanding suicide. It further enables an understanding of the pragmatics of certain utterances. Some useful excerpts evidential of this are:

Excerpt 65: mental health should be brought to the fore

Excerpt 66: mental illness is real

Excerpt 67: depression is not all about being sad

Excerpt 68: depression is not a state of feeling just sad, it is a state of feeling empty, worthless, suffocated

Excerpt 69: you can't blame them because he died of depression...the guy was sick and his sickness killed him...

Excerpt 70: ...what could have made him to be so depressed to taking his own life...could it be his sister's pee or his mother not supporting him?

Excerpt 71: "depression is a disease just like cancer

Excerpt 72: some comments here shows how ignorant Africans are...Don't just expect someone with depression to 'get over it' It ain't that easy...some people just lack common sense and mannerism...just shut up if you don't know what suicide and depression is all about. Humans without empathy

Excerpt 73: Only those who have escaped depression could understand that most often depressed thoughts of death are usually what console...

Excerpt 74: as for some of you ignorant folks that don't know what depression is all about let me enlighten you a little. If you constantly feed your subconscious

with depressive input, you are bound to end up depressed...depression is real. Suicide is not an option.

The foregoing excerpts medicalise and psychiatrise suicide. They provide psychological context to understand probable reasons why victims commit suicide. The recurrence of 'depression', 'Mental health', 'mental illness', 'depressed thoughts', and 'depressive input' frame with discourse and suggest that suicide victims were in an altered frame of mind. These perceptions align with existing literature (Izadinia, Amiri, Jahromi, and Hamidi, 2010; Wanyoike, 2014; Brådvik, 2018). Horney (1950) for instance attributes the incidence of suicide to neurosis which is a mental and emotional disorder. These commenters therefore regard suicide as being linked to an ill mental state.

Force-intensify

As mentioned earlier, *force* has to do with the degree of intensity. Commenters assertively state their opinions on suicide. In these, they actively attempt to provide reasons for suicide. A dichotomy is recognized: suicide may have been provoked by individual factors or by extrinsic factors.

Excerpt 75: But these days we are more busy chasing ghost on the internet than being friends to our friends. RIP, brother.

Excerpt 76: It may not be SUICIDE, it may be MURDER! Some of us kill them with our remarks!

Excerpt 77: He was a child begging to be loved and the most important people to him, his parents just chose not to care! This child suffered neglect...lack of care and love. Who puts him aright at that early stage???

Excerpt 78: he already died since he was young

Excerpt 79: He needed a listening ear. Someone who have walked through that path and understood what he was feeling...

Excerpt 80: no one understands the pain; it feels like drowning but not dying

Excerpt 81: maybe his time on this plain was up. Rest on boy

Excerpt 82: your mind was set I'm sorry...i really don't know why

Excerpt 83: I have been there and I understood him, am sad none of our likes knew him before he departed...may his soul rest in peace

The commenters assert that suicide is the outcome of emotional, social, environmental and/or spiritual factors. Commenters signal that oftentimes eventual suicide victims actually manifest identifiable traits which signal their emotional state. However since everyone is involved in a rat race to improve their livelihood, attention is not paid to these evidential traits. In their interventions, these commenters also provide ways through which mental health can be attended to – being friendly, having a listening ear, and being available and able to assist when suicide-prone individuals are going through their difficult times.

There are encounters with comments that are accusatory – ‘we are more busy chasing ghost on the internet than being friends to our friends’ and ‘It may not be SUICIDE, it may be MURDER! Some of us kill them with our remarks!’ These are accentuated by realisations like ‘suffered neglect...lack of care and love’, ‘he already died since he was young’ (which implies that the victim suffered emotional inadequacies since childhood), and ‘He needed a listening ear’. These expressions suggest that if only more attention had been paid to the suicide victims when they were alive, they probably would have been dissuaded from taking their lives. These commenters thus assert that it is extremely important that people are shown love, empathy, care and friendliness to help them walk through overwhelming challenges of life.

Conclusion

The study has been concerned with an interrogation of suicide narratives from the perspectives of the suicide victims and the publics. The ramifications of the linguistic enquiry have indicated that victims are blamed for their situation, contextual circumstances (government, families, and institutions) are identified as motivating suicides and there is the preponderance of empathetic narratives around suicide. In addition, the narratives indicate the place of religion and cultural ideology in the perception of and reaction to suicide. A recurring identification is that understanding suicide goes way beyond the surface textual structure of suicide notes. Linguistic performativity in suicide narratives act as signifiers since they are indicative of the emotional and psychological state of victims. They are also revelatory of the subsisting attitudes towards the reality of suicide. Victims' suicide posts, however dark they may be regarded, function as signposts to the mentally-sapping, economically-straining and emotionally-disturbing situation of many Nigerians. This explains why commenters are usually able to identify themselves with the victims. The availability of these suicide posts online also signal the ubiquity of social media in mediating contemporary human social interactions. 'Like', 'share' and 'comment' therefore reveal more than the interpersonal and sociality of the digital space; they are indicative of the 'de-spacing' which these platforms seek to engender. Suicide victims oftentimes put their thoughts out to be public either in order to seek interventions or to document their reality for posterity. They reveal their depression, dejection, emotional turmoil/trauma, frustration, mental fatigue, exhaustion etc.

On the other hand, commenters on suicide posts navigate their participation through an acknowledgement of the daily challenges faced by Nigerians. They x-ray the situation and provide empathetic feedback and concern. Although some of the commenter upbraided the victims for being hasty in taking their lives, most of the comments are emotive and provide context for the observed rise in suicide among Nigerian youth. One further encounters the integration of religion and cultural ethos in suicide

narrative. These are used oftentimes in judgmental contexts, signifying that suicide is frowned at both within religious and socio-cultural contexts. Ideological perspectives of course emanate from these realities and connote ways through which normative attitudes are constructed. Suicide is therefore not positively imagined or attributed within these digital engagements. While these commenters also tried to relate their experiences to those of the victims in a way of being empathetic, they also dichotomised the reasons for suicidality – split between individual factors (issues specific to a victim) and extrinsic factors (issues beyond the control of the victim).

A significant realisation from the analysis, one which is interesting and encouraging, is the recognition of the need for more awareness on suicide and mental health online. In some instances, especially on Facebook and Twitter, commenters tagged governmental and privately-owned organisations whose lines of duties were related to suicide and mental-health matters. Through these, one recognises advocacies for mental health and psychological wellbeing, both being helpful in combating suicide-proneness. These online platforms are especially beneficial to Nigerian young people as revealed from the data, who are increasingly prone to suicide. Manifestations of these online also mean that access to such information is dispersible among the necessary demography.

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