

***Zvinhu zvirikufaya* [things are going on well]: A Zimbabwean internet meme and Diaspora discourse**

Ivy Musekiwa¹

Abstract

This paper examines one of Zimbabwe's popular internet memes that has gone viral on social media. The meme is a discourse in which Zimbabweans throughout the diaspora and those in Zimbabwe claim that things are going on well in their lives through videos posted on the internet. Zimbabweans who have migrated to other countries use the internet to corroborate the claim that wherever they are life is comfortable. They are constantly posting varied videos of testimonies expressing good life on a special Facebook page named "Zvirikufaya". Some fascinating aspects emerge from the videos as they mostly display materialistic markers of opulence to support the claim that zvinhu zvirikufaya [things are going on well]. The postings wrestle to dispel certain (mis)conceptions that the majority of Zimbabweans in and outside the country are suffering. The meme gives key insights about Zimbabweans in the diaspora and those who remained at home using the internet to keep connected. It also creates spaces for Zimbabweans in different spatial zones to exchange ideas about the country and its culture. This discourse between diasporans and those who remained in the country opens a window into the way Zimbabweans are living around the world.

Key words: Internet performance, meme, zvirikufaya, diaspora, discourse, Zimbabwe

¹ Independent scholar. e-mail: ivymusekiwa@gmail.com

This paper analyses how Zimbabweans in various parts of the world perform cultural unity and satisfaction through internet memes. The memes contain videos posted on the social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp. The videos are meant to demonstrate how various Zimbabweans who have been dispersed throughout the world display ideas of living well wherever they are. The videos, which are now popularly known as “*Zvirikufaya*” [things are going on well], demonstrate claims about things going well for Zimbabweans in spite of the country’s current socio-political conditions. Since the year 2000, Zimbabweans have been displaced to other countries due to the country’s socio-economic crisis and political instability. This situation is regarded as ‘a crisis’ (Primorac 2006; McGregor 2010; Vambe 2010). Because of the crisis there have been dislocations and relocations of Zimbabweans (Ndlovu 2010). However, displacements are not a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe as they occurred even before, during, and after the colonial era. Displacements continued on a larger scale during the war of liberation from the early 1970s to 1980. The displaced populations are now emerging through the internet in their various locations as a way of bringing themselves closer to each other culturally. In the memes they emphasise that wherever they are things are going on well for them.

Memes have become a recent medium for the expression of culture and for entertainment in Zimbabwean. It is believed that the *Zvirikufaya* memes by Zimbabweans were triggered by a video posted on the internet by a certain Zimbabwean businessman. In the video the businessman displays his wealth and brags that life is good for him in Zimbabwe. He further states that he has no intention of living anywhere else but in Zimbabwe. It seems the video provoked people in the diaspora and in Zimbabwe alike. Thus, the *Zvirikufaya* memes seem to be responding to the video which was first created by the businessman. Even the *Zvirikufaya* Facebook page creator gives credit to the Zimbabwean businessman by acknowledging that he is the one who inspired the Facebook page creator to come up with the *Zvirikufaya* meme.

A framework developed by Shifman’s (2013) is used to analyse the memes. Shifman (2013) argues that scholars are able to analyse internet memes focusing on three mimetic dimensions: content, form and stance. These capture the creative elements of a meme and depict the contributor’s attitude towards the subject matter. Content refers to the ideas conveyed by the meme, while form refers to the visual images. Stance refers to the ways in which addressers position themselves within the memes. The stance can also be subdivided into three dimensions which are (i) participation structures, (ii) keying, and (iii) communicative functions. The notion of “participation structures” refers to the people who are entitled to participate in the memes and how they contribute to the memes. Keying refers to the tone and style of communication prevalent in the meme. Lastly, communicative functions refer to the addresser and his or her emotions.

The term meme was introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976) in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Memes are spread from person to person by copying or imitation (Dawkins 1976:192). Internet memes are commonly used to propagate content such as jokes, rumours, videos and it may spread in its original form. Dawkins (1976) describes a meme as gene-like infectious units of culture that spread from person to person. Shifman (2013: 367) defines memes as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated and transformed by internet users, creating a shared experience”. However, Shifman (2013) further says that an internet meme is a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and or stance.

The word meme is derived from the Greek word ‘*Mimeme*’ signifying “something which is imitated” which Dawkins shortened to rhyme with gene (Dawkins 1976:192). In a meme cultural information is passed from person to person, and scaled into a shared social phenomenon (Boyd 2000; Conte 2000; Shifman 2013; Spitzberg 2014). Dawkins (1976) talks of “repackaging” memes in order to pass them to others, but in the present digital age people do not need to repackage memes (Milner 2013; Shifman 2013). Memes are spread through the

internet simply by forwarding, linking or copying them (Milner 2013; Shifman 2013). Memes are flexible enough to capture a wide range of communicative intentions and actions from naïve copy to scornful imitation (Shifman 2013). The memes diffusion through competition and selection makes them appealing to scholars mainly for analysis purposes. In internet culture “viral” refers to a metaphor that is prudent to the content (Blackmore 2000, Shifman 2013). Wiggins and Bowers (2014:5) and Shifman (2013) argue that the metaphor of the virus has rendered the audience passive receptors to the memes that infect them. Therefore, the initial meaning of the meme has been altered in the course of its diffusion. The units of popular culture are imitated and circulated as groups of content consisting of items that were created with awareness of each other and share common characteristics. The success of memes depends on generating wide attention, the rapid uptake and spread of particular ideas presented in the form of videos (Ekdale & Tully 2014; Shifman 2013).

The definition of a meme shows that it is a media activity or concept which spreads, often as mimicry, from person to person via the internet (Ekdale & Tully 2014). Memes are often viewed as non-political spaces and constitute vernacular creativity. The *Zvirikufaya* memes are in vernacular and are supposed to balance the views from the diaspora and those emanating from Zimbabwe. As it is the nature of memes to “infect” as many people as possible the *zvirikufaya* meme went viral with the Facebook page reaching 2000 likes within the first week of its creation.

Zvirikufaya is a phenomenon in the social media such as Facebook, and WhatsApp and is used to display comfort rather than discontent among Zimbabweans at home and in the diaspora. It consists of videos testimonies being posted by Zimbabweans from all over the world. The videos clips are approximately one to two minutes long. They feature an individual or a group of Zimbabweans proudly declaring that “things are going well”. The stance of the addressers is hilarious.. The videos mostly display Zimbabweans in various locations displaying their wealth. Some videos are shot in Zimbabwe and others originate from the Diaspora. It seems from the onset the stance, content and form of the videos are not supposed to be associated with tribalism, politics or even racism. The *Zvirikufaya* meme can also be a leisure activity. It is a cultural activity which seeks to unite Zimbabweans across the world.

The stance, content and form of the videos suggest that those in the diaspora feel that people at home are of the view that things are not going well for those in the diaspora. In turn, the videos made by those in the diaspora try to show that the people are in fact doing better than those in Zimbabwe. Video contributors in Zimbabwe view the messages from the diaspora as a provocation; thus the videos show competition between those who lie in Zimbabwe and those who are in the Diaspora. Although some simply share their experiences of life in a comic way, others seem not to have anything meaningful to share except to simply feature in the videos.

The videos can be grouped into two categories. There are those videos that feature people eating a variety of foods as a way to show off to the ones in Zimbabwe, given the austerity measures that they have to contend with. This can however be read differently as a way of portraying cultural unity rather than showing off materialistic things such as cars, iPods, food, houses, radios computers and other electronic gadgets. Most of the videos feature material possessions and expressions of unity.

The memes videos portray certain social and cultural values through language. The positioning of the addressers through their conversations constructs a storyline (Chik 2015:114). One meme shows a young Zimbabwean man filming himself driving around with a white girl. The storyline is that the man seems to suggest that he is celebrating the fact that that he is dating a white girl. The conversation starts with “*Zvirikufaya kuno ku Europe. tirikuenda ku ... tirikugara kuHolland. Tiri kuenda kuGermany, nhasi tiri kuBelgium. Zvirikufaya! Imi munongoti zvirikufaya kuZimbabwe. Aka kabhehhi kangu aka*”. [Things are

going well in Europe... we live in Holland ...We are going to Germany... today we are in Belgium. Things are going well. You say things are going well in Zimbabwe, here is my white girl friend]. The white girl waves and says “hi, zvirikufayaaa!” The guy goes on to say, “Kamuvheti! Ndakakajuma!” [I am lucky to have a white girlfriend] The girl also says, “Ndakakajuma-jumha kamubhoyi”. [I am lucky to have a Black boyfriend].

The man’s utterances are set against the backdrop of Zimbabweans coming from a background of colonialism where it was a crime for a black man to date a white woman and vice versa. The video suggests that the young man considers it a privilege to date a white person. By saying “[I got her by luck” the man suggests having a white girlfriend is a stroke of good fortune, and that he is transgressing old colonial restrictions and is free to do as he pleases in Europe, and is able not just to taste, but to eat the whole forbidden fruit. Thus, the man’s stance can be viewed as celebrating freedom of association in the diaspora where there are no tensions or restrictions between black people and their white counterparts. In Zimbabwe the tension between black and white people resulted from years of colonial rule and escalated after the seizure, in 2000, of white owned farms as part of the Land reform programme. Colonial apartheid engendered a sense of inferiority among Black people. In view of such racial history, dating a white person in Zimbabwe has also been viewed as unacceptable. The utterance *juma juma* is Zimbabwean slang which is an exclusive sub-cultural lingua franca, and refers to the colonially imposed racial segregation. The Shona language in the meme is used to connect all Zimbabweans around the world.

Freedom of association is also expressed in a meme by a woman who calls herself VaChihera. She is filmed on location somewhere in the Diaspora. VaChihera demonstrates her freedom of association by showing off her white husband and bi-racial children. She further shows off her white *muroora* [daughter-in-law] and her white sisters-in-law. Although the video is about her, other people in the video reinforce the idea that Zimbabweans are associating with other nationalities in the Diaspora and integrating smoothly. The meme shows that Zimbabweans can be anywhere they want and can associate with anyone. The video is in a way mocking the people in Zimbabwe who are seen as not having the same freedoms and are instead constrained by cultural norms and restrictions. The language and the storyline of the videos convey a view that diaspora is a place of opportunity while home is constraining.

An interesting video emerged from Zimbabwe where a man was seen slaughtering and dressing a goat to show that things are going well for him. The video expresses and proclaims that things are going well for him in Zimbabwe as he is able to slaughter a goat in his backyard without getting into trouble as he would be in other parts of the world where such practices are proscribed. The video displays a certain freedom which is associated with his homeland Zimbabwe. The man demonstrates that he not only enjoys the meat but that he also has the joy of preparing his own food from scratch. The implication of this meme is that those in the diaspora cannot do the same as they can be charged with cruelty to animals for slaughtering an animal in their backyard. The video represents the man as enjoying the culture of independence associated with “being at home”.

Another meme shows a white man in a camouflage uniform who appears to be coming from his duty somewhere. His audience seems to be the people in Zimbabwe. The addresser uses Shona playfully and says, “magetsi munoaziva here aya?” [Do you know this is electricity?] He further says, “ndadzima ndabatidza” [I have switched off and on]. He is actually mocking the people in Zimbabwe that they do not have the luxury of having a constant supply of electricity because of load shedding and power rationing in Zimbabwe. The man’s stance proffers the idea that he is living a different life from those who are in Zimbabwe as he can actually control when the lights in his house come on or go off. The man goes on to show off that he can cook sadza [maize meal, Zimbabwe’s staple dish] with a lot of meat and vegetables. He is mockingly demonstrating that people in Zimbabwe cannot afford to do the

same because of the economic challenges the country is facing. The use of Shona as a medium of communication demonstrates connections among Zimbabweans, whether they are black or white. The white man in the meme also uses the Zimbabwean staple food to show his affiliation to Zimbabwean culture.

Another interesting video involves a young girl living abroad who does not talk much but lets the video express a different communicative role through her actions to demonstrate that *zvirikufaya* (all is well). She just says, “hatiuyiko, zvedu zvirikufaya” [We will not come there; things are going well for us]. She is seen coming out of a double-storey house and rides on her scooter showing the rich neighbourhood that she lives in, emphasizing the comfortable life she is apparently enjoying. The utterance *hatiuyeko* [We will not come back there] serves to reiterate the idea that life outside Zimbabwe is better compared to the life in Zimbabwe.

The *zvirikufaya* memes have inspired interest and sparked criticism from viewers residing in Zimbabwe and from around the world. Some critics view the memes as harmless and comic gimmicks, while others find them either offensive or frivolous (Zindoga 2014). Ignatius Mabasa (2014) and Eric Knight (2014) suggest that the Zimbabwean meme performers in the diaspora are “ignorant underachievers” who are in a [cultural and spiritual orphanage]”. Mabasa (2014) says that life in the diaspora is neither ‘worthwhile nor meaningful’. He views the diaspora as a jungle where the survival rule is “eat or be eaten”. Mabasa (2014) views home as a place where one has dignity and respect.

Some readers were discontent with these generalisations by Mabasa (2014) and Knight (2014) about the *Zvirikufaya* videos. Some people argue that the *Zvirikufaya* videos create a division between those in the diaspora and those who are in Zimbabwe (*New Zimbabwe* 2014). Others view *Zvirikufaya* memes as constituting a healthy humorous debate in which one can sense that those in the Diaspora still love their country and are proud to be Zimbabweans (Chikwava 2009). Some people in the diaspora display the Zimbabwean flags wherever they are and are seen eating Zimbabwean food although they talk about how life is good in the diaspora. Therefore the memes create a space for dialogue and interaction, rather than division and discontent. Zimbabweans in both the Diaspora and those in Zimbabwe are proud to be Zimbabweans despite being bombarded with the negative news about Zimbabwe in the international media. Zimbabweans have found a way of uniting culturally by sharing with each other through the *Zvirikufaya* memes. It is interesting to note that the focus is no longer *zvkapresser* or *zvadhakwa* or *mahwani* [things are difficult]. *Zvirikufaya* meme focuses on the bright side of life. Either way, Zimbabweans are showing the world that no matter where one is or the circumstances one is facing, being a Zimbabwean is a cause for celebration because Zimbabweans share the same culture and maintain a sense of connectedness through memories of survival on either end.

The memes from Zimbabwe express freedom as shown by the slaughtering of a goat in a rural homestead. Although there seems to be a difference in content and stance between the people in the Diaspora and those in Zimbabwe, memes consistently communicate a sense of connectedness between Zimbabweans in the Diaspora and those at home.

The language that is used in the memes constructs the idea that Zimbabweans are united culturally. This idea is echoed by Henrich *et al* (2004:29) who observed that language traditionally spoken by the addressers is useful because it provides a measure of cultural relatedness. Therefore these memes, through the Shona language, are used to connect people in the diaspora and in Zimbabwe. The social values and cultural symbols in the memes such as language and food are used to enhance unity among Zimbabweans (Lee 2015:183). The *zviri kufaya* memes that are produced and posted on social media help us understand the social reality of Zimbabweans at home and abroad. The positioning of the addressers in the videos through their conversations constructs a storyline. Chik (2015:114) observes that in digital conversations people position themselves and others to maintain a certain storyline. The

storyline rooted in these conversations is embedded in cultural and social experiences of all Zimbabweans, at home and in the Diaspora. Behavioural patterns in the stance, content and form by the addressers in the memes posted on social media allow a social construction of cultural unity among dispersed Zimbabweans.

Conclusion

The *zvirikufaya* memes from Zimbabwe and abroad, the memes communicate shared aspects of Zimbabwean culture. The memes gives an insight into the resilience of Zimbabwean culture and the significance of maintaining links with “home”. The memes demonstrate that the way Zimbabweans are interacting online is changing. Zimbabweans are using the internet more widely for communication and for sharing their culture. More importantly, Zimbabweans unite through the internet meme. The meme also serves to show that Zimbabweans have managed to maintain their Zimbabwean culture and identity despite the influence of other cultures. The free flow of the *zvirikufaya* videos translates into a free flow of cultural ideas and brings Zimbabweans closer together. The memes have become zones for interactivity, for maintaining links with home, and for exhibiting pride in being a Zimbabwean.

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