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Research Article

Language use in the construction of memory: A study of T-shirts inscriptions of graduating students

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the linguistic choices in the construction of memory on the T-shirts worn by graduating students at the University of Calabar and Cross River University of Technology, Calabar in Southern Nigeria. The study adopts multimodal discourse analysis and memory theories to account for the motivations behind the inscriptions, the situational meanings they communicate and the explication of the semiotic resources within the social context of the university environment. A total of 112 graduating students representing the target population participated in the study. The data were generated by means of semi-structured interviews while using audiotape recording and digital cameras as research tools to elicit the appropriate information. The findings show that the use of inscripted T-shirts has become a popular youth culture among graduating students in Nigerian universities purposively devised to re-enact memories of their complex experiences as students. As demonstrated by the participants, the T-shirt inscriptions reflect the collective (un)pleasant memories of achievement and self-fulfillment, relief and freedom, gratitude, leadership and challenges which transmitted via semiotic resources that portray peace, joy and social elevation. The messages are combined to covertly portray the deteriorating state of education in Nigeria and call for revamping strategies that could introduce a conducive environment, and a promising economy that would ease hardship on Nigerian students.

Keywords: language use; construction of memory; T-shirts inscriptions; graduating students; Nigerian universities

1. Introduction

Human beings, across the globe, and depending on their cultures and civilisations, have diverse ways of communicating the complex activities of life through the spoken and written media. Communication, according to Uwen and Ebam[1], could be it verbal, non-verbal or sign-mediated, and is pivotal to the functioning of individuals and institutions as they rely on it to make meanings out of the series of activities that advance the existence and survival of man in the society. Written communication is devised in orthographic, alphabetic, numeric, symbolic, indexical and/or iconic signs that are mutually comprehensible in a social context. These forms of writing apparently fall within inscriptions. Khan and Vaidya[2] define inscription as anything written or engraved on something, such as stone, wood, metal, ivory plagues, bronze statutes, bricks, shell pottery, fabric, among others. The authors posit that one of the earliest references to inscriptions is the Brahmi of Ashokan inscription that is believed to have existed in pre-Mauryan times as reported evidently during the evacuation in Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka dated as early as the fourth century BC.

Societies of the world have since initiated, developed and used different shades of inscriptions to express the circumstances that emerge in their sociocultural contexts.

Although the multifaceted significance of inscriptions have not attracted the expected scholarly attention, however, a few scholars have investigated the impressions inscriptions bear in the regional and global contexts. These scholars limit their investigations to inscriptions on religious buildings, monuments, fabrics, vehicles, documents and other engravings on stones and historical artefacts. For instance, Kelly[3], Soleimani and Shishebori[4] state that inscriptions on religious buildings adopt geometric and floral patterns meant to show the spiritual aesthetics and religious calligraphy which are combined to pass doctrinal messages. Ancell[5], Taluah and Musah[6] demonstrate that writings on vehicles are also symbolic appropriation of language to convey diverse ideological conceptions that evenly reconstruct the social contexts whether the vehicles are stationary or mobile. On the letterings on fabrics, Salamon[7] and Zdatny[8], assert that they are contextually conceived and bear situated information for the participants including their status, political ideologies and social realities. Vagionskis[9] also mentions that some documents bear inscriptions that provide strategic clues to the services some institutions offer to the public. Again, Schluter[10], Khan and Vaidya[2] demonstrate that other engravings on monuments, stones and artefacts, and sometimes T-shirts separately provide historical significations to the audience and create tourists' images within the given sociocultural milieu. Based on these contributions, it is deduced that the common features among inscriptions are the fact that they are transient, context dependent and culture-specific in nature, and they particularly communicate shared experience and perform social functions among the creators and users. Also, Zienkowski[11], Taluah and Musah[6] have corroborated that inscriptions are invariably shaped by context with dynamic meanings that are influenced by sociocultural factors and shared experiences of the participants as they perform situated social functions

In Nigeria, Nwoye[12], Farrel[13], Chiluwa[14] and Zkariya[15] have examined the communicative significance of inscriptions. The authors agreed that inscriptions are characteristically brief and incisive with relevant messages for particular audiences to address multiple social issues and identities. Other scholars such as Anyakola and Eluwa[16], Adenaike[17], and Osiebe[18] are of the view that Nigerian indigenous fashion bear covert symbolic inscriptions utilised for the appropriation and invocation of positive valances, incitement of disaffection, display of peered ideologies, portrayal of hegemonic power and communication of intentions. On T-shirts in Nigeria, Chiluwa and Ajiboye[19] posit that inscriptions mediate between fashion and social discourse and communicate messages with different topics on politics, business, environment and religion. T-shirt in this circumstance can symbolically speak to the onlookers within a shared social context. Another study on T-shirt is Nwala[20], who undertakes a pragma-syntactic analysis of slogans on T-shirts. The author concludes that such impressions are used to achieve different discourse and communicative themes which help to describe people, events, positions, situations and social environment. The studies that particularly examine the dress code of Nigerian students are Upah[21], Umeh-Idika and Ikejiaku[22]. Upah[21] rather cautions the indecent dressing by the students of Kwara State University, Nigeria, warning that dresses bear semiotic resources capable of sending out wrong messages on the social behaviour of the wearer to the onlookers. It is Umeh-Idika and Ikejiaka[22] that examine the inscriptions on the clothing of the students of higher institutions in Abia State. They argue that the letterings are influenced by Nigerian celebrities in football, music and entertainment sectors. Generally, apart from comfort, covering and protection of the body, people wear clothing for other reasons such as trending fashion, social recognition, enactment of social status, self-adornment, construction of identity, and maintenance of psychological balance. The inscriptions on such clothing also vary according to the beliefs system of the wearers, the social environment and the situational contexts.

The studies reviewed above focus on the origin, meaning and nature of inscriptions while others examine inscriptions on religious buildings, vehicles and clothing as religious, political and social discourses. The only studies on dressing by Nigerian undergraduates investigate the subject at the levels of (in)decency and celebration of personalities. The absence of studies on T-shirts' inscriptions worn by graduating students in Nigerian universities and the categories of messages they bear specifically form the research gap that motivated this investigation. The use of T-shirts with various inscriptions by undergraduate students in their final and last examination is an emerging youth participatory culture in the universities. The inscriptions are suggestive of students' community of practice that situate the participants as a social group. In such social groups, Wenger[23] maintains that members participate actively in community practices for the purpose of identity negotiation and construction associated with members. These, to the researchers, is an imperative dimension of investigation given the relevance of the youth population and the emerging identities they construct and messages they convey in this participatory culture. The target participants are graduating students of the University of Calabar (henceforth Unical) and Cross River University of Technology, Calabar (henceforth Crutech) who wrote their final examinations from February to March, 2023. Calabar is a cosmopolitan city located in Southern Nigeria. This study is important because it aims to examine the T-shirts' inscriptions with a view to ascertaining the socio-pragmatic functions in the (re)construction of students' experiences and memories within the social context of the universities. By so doing, the study would situate the peculiarities of the experiences and memories which could form the basis for comparison with students in other institutions.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on two theoretical backgrounds: multimodal discourse analysis and memory theory. The combination of these two theories in the analysis of T-shirt inscriptions by graduating students is capable of handling the projection of the students' individual, collective and universal experiences through a constellation of different modes of communication. Multimodal discourse analysis (henceforth, MDA) is a multidisciplinary discourse approach that analyses different modes of communication in a text. LeVine and Scollon[24] argue that a text is always and inevitably constructed across multiple modes of communication, including speech and gesture not just in spoken language but through such 'contextual' phenomena as the use of the physical spaces in which we carry out our discursive actions. This includes the design, papers, and typography of the documents within which our texts are presented to convey messages. It implies that texts are heterogeneous in nature, thus, they are made up of different modes (e.g., visuals, gestures, colour, among others) apart from language. These semiotic features, according to Olateju, Oyebode and Ademilokun[25], are construed in relation to the socio-cultural environment or leanings understood by the participants. The primary assumption of MDA is that almost all texts constitute a hybridisation of different modes of communication. Each of the modes of communication contributes distinctly to the overall construction and explication of meaning. Some of the modes have universal meanings, while others depend largely on the user's experience, ideology, and context of usage for their interpretations. MDA is based on Halliday[26,27], Halliday and Matthiessen[28] Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). Specifically, it draws on Halliday's social semiotics which views language as a set of inter-related choices that enables users to choose from in a particular social context. Halliday[26] identifies three meta-functions of language: ideational function, interpersonal function, and the textual function. The ideational function is concerned with participants' consciousness with the real world; this connects with its representations described by the process, participants and circumstances. The interpersonal function relates with the relationship between the speaker and the hearer while the textual function of language deals with the verbal world, that is, the creation of a text through the use of language, and in relation to the context.

Drawing from Halliday's conceptualisation, social semioticians (e.g., van Leeuwen[29], Kress and van Leeuwen[30], O'Toole[31], and O'Halloran[32]) account for the complex array of semiotic resources which are used to create meaning (e.g., language, visual imagery, gesture, sound, music, three dimensional objects and architecture) and detailed practices for analysing the meaning arising from the integrated use of those resources in communicative artefacts (i.e., texts) and events. On this, Kress and van Leeuwen[30] cited in Feng and Espindola[33] argue that visual images also perform three meta-functions, like language: representational function (the representation of the experiential world), interactive function (the interaction between the participants represented in a visual design and its viewers), compositional function (the compositional arrangements of visual resources). Representational meaning consists of two processes, namely narrative process and conceptual process. Narrative process, according to Ping[34] accounts for action process, reaction process, verbal and mental process, while the conceptual process contains relational process and existential process that are combined to generate meaning. The interactive meaning covers contact, attitude, distance and modality. Compositional meaning encapsulates information value, framing and salience. The social semiotic approach to MDA is adopted in this work because of its impulse to handle the visual realisation of memory in graduating students' T-shirt inscriptions. Specifically, the systemic linguistic perspective of metafunctional meaning by Kress and van Leeuwen[35] is adopted in the analysis of verbal and visual modes in graduating students' T-shirt inscriptions in order to show how both modes represent ideas about the world, represent something about their writers and readers, and shape the arrangements of the visual resources.

Memory theory (henceforth MT) is a psychological theory that accounts for the cognitive processes involved in the recollection of past actions and events. Memory is a psychological process that enables an individual to recall or remember past events or experiences. Robertson[36] states that memory describes the numerous biological devices by which living organisms acquire and retain new ideas and important information. The authors argue further that memory involves two forms of recall: perfect and imperfect retained in one's experience. The perfect recall connects previous actions to previous knowledge, while imperfect recall deals with the limited knowledge of human beings to process some information in a particular context. Central to the theorisation of memory is the fact that higher animals, especially human beings gain knowledge which is stored, and later conjured up for use in different contexts. In the past, memory was considered to be a unitary process. However, recent studies (e.g., Ledoux[37], and Baddeley[38] indicate that memory is a multi-dimensional and complex process. Therefore, according to Sumrall, Sumrall and Doss[39] the concept of memory includes a variety of different ways in which the brain adapts and changes as a result of complex experiences stored in the brain. The authors identify five main different types of memory: episodic memory, semantic memory (together referred to declarative memory), perceptual representation system, procedural memory, and working memory. One crucial concept to the framework of memory theory that is applied to this study is the coding processes. Following Baddeley's[38], and Sumrall, Sumrall and Doss'[39], the coding processes relate to those sensory, perceptual, and higher cognitive processes that help to transform objects and events from the outside world into their mental representation of experiences. According to Erll[40,41], these experiences conceived in memory are evoked as the wandering of carriers, forms, media, contents and practices of memory, and their construction and transmission across time, geographical space, social contexts and linguistics borders. The representation of such experiences is influenced by the interactional goal of the participants within the social environment. A combination of memory theory with multimodal discourse analysis in the study of graduating students' T-shirts inscriptions is considered very appropriate for this study because they account for the socio-cognitive meaning that is projected through multimodal texts of the selected data.

3. Data and methods

Data for this study were generated using a qualitative ethnographic approach on the focus group of graduating students. The practice is that the students wear the labelled T-shirts on the day they are scheduled to write their final examination in the university. The T-shirts worn by graduating Nigerian university students are usually soft slim wears made from different types of clothing materials, shapes, quality and designs. These variations depend on the department or faculty the students belong to and the dimension of individual or collective message(s) the wearers intend to pass across. The shirts are predominantly in white, designed with rich semiotic resources that communicate the situated (past) events and circumstances surrounding the physical and psychological experiences in the university's social context of the graduating students. It is when they finish the final examination that they come out in their numbers to celebrate with different inscriptions on the T-shirts they wear. It is this 'celebration' mood that the researchers utilised to meet, snap and interview the participants to elicit information on the motivations for the participatory culture. Using the random sampling technique, one hundred and eighty-nine graduating students were consulted to be interviewed while their photographs were taken by the researchers. Out of the 189 graduating students consulted, only 112 representing the focus population were willing to participate. In the distribution, 66 participants (59 percent) were graduating students from of Unical while 46 (41 percent) were drawn from Crutech. On gender distribution, 58 (52 percent) were females while 54 (48 percent) were males. The choice of the schools was informed by the heterogeneous, multicultural, multi-ethnic, and diverse backgrounds of the students' population. It is believed that these, and the different experiences they had in the university have impacted on the content of the inscriptions on the T-shirts they wore.

The ethnographic field research method used was semi-structured interviews aided by audiotape recording and snapping of still photographs. The use of these instrument(s) and techniques confirmed the reliability and validity of the variables because they were effectively used in the elicitation of unbiased revelations from members of the focus group. The researchers, as component members of the university community enabled unhindered access to the students' subpopulation and seamless extraction of the relevant information. The researchers' roles were significant because, as earlier graduates of Nigerian universities, their experiences helped in the correlation, and situating the students' narrations on their T-shirts and interviews. The positionality of the researchers facilitated the elicitation of relevant data. Categorically, semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to elicit demographic and other salient information on the relationship between their T-shirts inscriptions and the participants' experiences. Three major questions that dominated the interviews were: what is the meaning of the inscription? What is the motivation behind it? And what are the meanings of the colours of the T-shirts and inscriptions within the participants' social context and community of practice? A total of 48 interviews were conducted to avoid unwieldiness and overlapping of responses while a minimum of 15 minutes length of recording is spent on each interviewee. The technique enabled interactive exchanges with the graduating students which revealed the diverse motivations from the creators of the inscriptions. Audiotape recorders were used to preserve the recorded voices of the participants in the unstructured interview sessions for transcription, while digital cameras were used to take still photographs that captured the inscriptions on the T-shirts. The field work lasted for two months (February to March, 2023) within the period that the focus group wrote their final examinations. The research procedure strictly followed the ethical standards of the Unical and Crutech following approvals from the Ethical Committees. The data collected were reviewed, grouped and coded for analysis based on the participants' opinions. The coding methods were based on the similarity of themes conveyed in the data using Braun and Clarke's[42] thematic and content analysis approach.

4. Results and discussion

The data were thematically categorised for the purpose of analysis. Each inscription is explicated in the interpretive context of the participants' experiences within the university environment. The situational context-based interpretation of the T-shirt inscriptions is complemented by participants' self-opinions that evidently reveal the motivations and decrypt the implied meanings embedded in the inscriptions within the university setting. The setting here, according to Saville-Troike[43], becomes the macrosocial context with such features that communicate the setting/situation and interaction which relate to communicative events within which language is being produced, interpreted, and negotiated [determined by the] level of formality and participants' relationship. Based on this, the messages communicated through the inscriptions to capture the multimodal interpretation of the evocation of memories, are subcategorised and discussed under five strands of (related) memory. The other section of analysis provides the explication of the semiotic resources on the T-shirts. The categorisation of the analysis emerged from the participants' responses to the semi-structured interviews.

4.1. Memory of achievement and self-fulfillment

This set of inscriptions deals with individual and collective achievement(s) upon the completion of study in the university. For Diener[44], Diener and Tay[45], achievement is linked to self-satisfaction which produces gratitude, and whether momentarily primed or communicated as aspect of one's life form, it is as a circle of virtue that stimulates thoughts and feelings of fulfilment. Achievement is a recorded tangible or intangible success, that is, visible or invisible something that requires reasonable efforts that a person or group has succeeded in doing. Every success story is a celebration of an accomplishment of a set goal. An achievement could be positive or negative depending on the individual (or group) and the set aim which is usually achieved across time. Self-fulfillment is therefore the product of achievement. The participants in this context employed diverse linguistic choices to communicate the past experiences and efforts as students that culminated into certain feats. Such inscriptions include: *my hustle don pay* (my hard work has paid off), *my parents laboured while I studied and it paid off, dad and I really made it, I came I saw I conquered, BSc is done and dusted, I am no more an SSC holder, I am now counted among degree holders, I don pass my papa* (I have moved a step higher than my father), *I have broken family jinx, even village juju calmed down* (even the village god could not obstruct the writer's education), among others.

My hustle don pay is the memorable recast of selfless and tedious efforts the student dissipated in the course of study. The students in this category of inscription are engaged in menial jobs and excruciating activities to generate income to cater for the financial requirements of their university education. The inscription exposes the poverty rate of the nation and a system that exposes her young generation into hard labour to access university education. *My parents laboured while I studied and it paid off* recounts the divisibility of responsibilities that are combined to produce a university graduate in the Nigerian context. Such category of students is from the lower class whose parents are engaged in meagre-paid jobs to fend for the family and pay for the education of their children. *Dad and I made it* reflects the composition of parenthood of the writer which suggests any of this situation: either the student has a living but irresponsible mother, or the mother is late which makes education the sole responsibility of the father. The inscription denotes the productive result of team work and the dedication of success to the actors in the team: the student and the father. The adverb *really* also describes the past pains and efforts that yielded in the collective success in the possession of a university degree. *I came, I saw, I conquered* (popularly attributed to Julius Caesar's letter to the Roman Senate upon his victory at the battle of Zela), *BSc is done and dusted* and *I am now counted among degree holders* are symbolic representations of achievement and self-actualisation which foreground the completion of a degree programme and inclusion in the league of degree holders, a feat that is attained amidst

unpleasant experiences. *I am no longer an SSC holder* signifies a new status progression in the context of Nigerian academic qualifications. SSC (Senior Secondary Certificate) precedes a university degree, which upon attainment of the latter, has consequently upgraded the status of the writer. *I don pass my papa*, a Nigerian Pidgin expression that communicates the writer's revelation of the educational status of his/her father which is less than a university degree holder. *I have broken family jinx* is recall to genealogical limitation in the sphere of education. The inscription is a re-invocation of the memory a family (of nuclear or extended) composition that has got a university degree holder prior to the graduation of the participant which expresses an achievement and sets the pace for others to follow. *Even village juju calmed down* captures the memory of the segment of students immersed in traditional beliefs to the extent that the gods could obstruct the acquisition of university education in this instance. Also, a participant wearing a T-shirt inscription in this category revealed that "having a university degree in Nigeria, particularly in Unical, is worth celebrating, and it means one has surmounted daring to acquire the certificate which is the gateway to satisfactorily engaged in paid services". Another participant from Crutech recalls his memory this way: "I just spent five years or more for a programme for four, at a point I almost quitted: but this and that, lecturers' strikes, poor power supply and many painful experiences. To graduate from here, you are conqueror, so, I have every reason to celebrate." The expressions capture the mood of the graduating students who feel self-actualised in the aspect of their different courses of study. The principles of MDA and MT are applied here. The texts are scripted to communicate the graduating students' situated experiences within the university social context. The inscriptions (as they appear in **Figure 1** below), become a memorial mediation between their past, which is viewed in the present as achievement and fulfilment as energising indices that will enable them to launch into the future with brightening prospects.

Figure 1. Inscriptions on achievement and self-fulfillment.

4.2. Memory of relief and freedom

Freud[46] proposes that certain events stimulate relief from tension which releases psychic energy, such situations save psychic energy to cope in the event of fear and emotions arising from in-built tension and incongruity. According to Freud, relief of physiological tension enhances sound health, depletes stress and decreases pain. The graduating examination provides a sort of relief to the participants. The graduating students of the two universities also re-enacted the memory of relief and liberation through the inscriptions on the T-shirts they wore during their final examination. The inscriptions in this category include *Unically speaking I don do* (I am done with my studentship in the University of Calabar), *no more rules I don commot pass Unical gate* (I am out of the University of Calabar, I am no longer bound by its rules), *even sign post I no read again* (I won't even bother to read signpost anymore), *no more night class* (no more reading in the classroom all through the night), *my next of kin will continue, no more next semester, no more assignment deadlines, I don rest from 7 AM lectures* (I will no longer attend 7 am lectures), *no more change of lecture venue, I am free*

from Dr Demon, goodbye to Dr impromptu test, (goodbye to the lecturer who often gives impromptu test), *I am out of their claws* and *If you see a Crutech respect am e get why* (respect whoever graduated from Cross River University of Technology). *Unically speaking I don do* and *No more rules I don commot pass Unical gate* are liberating expressions connected to the rigors of studentship in the university. The inscriptions form a symbolic recollection of the heap of stringent activities and behavioural codes that one undergoes to become a graduate of the institution(s). The two labels jointly express freedom from a caged lifestyle and the launch into the non-university environment with exploits and innovations. *Even sign post I no read again* and *no more night class* are significations that bear memory of excruciating study experiences in their university days, experiences that have weaken further interest in reading (signpost). *My next of kin will continue* recalls the moments of self-denials of leisure in order to contend with academic activities, and points to graduation as an opportunity to quit the severities of education. The inscription is suggestive of a genealogical transfer of the acquisition of knowledge at the level of university degree to the next of kin. *No next semester, no more assignment deadlines*, *I don rest from 7 AM lectures* and *No more change of lecture venue* are captions that connect to the academic calendars and other activities. The deadlines lecturers assigned to the submission of assignments, 7am lecture time and uncertainties of unoccupied lecture halls informed this set of inscriptions. For *I am free from Dr Demon,* it is a metaphorical representation of a lecturer nicknamed *Dr Demon.* The name is used within the participants' community of practice to connote the lecturer's devilish tenets which are associated with the characteristics of the demon. The writer laments the humiliating experience as well as the relief from the caprices of such a lecturer. *Goodbye to Dr impromptu test* is an impression on a lecturer nicknamed *impromptu test* to describe his or her habitual action in giving unprepared tests. The writer's memory captures the high tendency of failure as the predictable outcome of unprepared tests and the outburst of joy and freedom from such worrisome experiences. *I am out of their claws* denotes the pluralisation of the oppressors of the writer. The writer's memory recounts those who had obstructed his academic progression, and his subsequent relief provided by the graduating examination. *If you see Crutech respect am e get why* bemoans series of regrettable involvements studentship has exposed the writer to prior to the graduating examination. A participant captures his relief thus: "You see this final exam that I just wrote, I have joy, that I am from free from all sorts of deadlines, impromptu this or that, change of lecture time and venue and some very furious lectures, just name them." Another participant demonstrates her freedom in the expression, "I think I am free now, it has not been easy to pass through a very complex university environment like Crutech where the good, the bad and the ugly, in fact, and the demons congregate, I can't say it all but I will only say it's a big relief to me and an opportunity to forge ahead in life." The participants' opinions re-authenticate the impressions created by the inscriptions which are all combined to communicate relief and freedom. This agrees with Olusola's[47] position that when memories of unpleasant feelings are re-enacted, the unwanted feelings are cleared, giving way to emotional freedom and the emergence of positive beliefs about self. Drawing on insights from MDA and MT, the inscriptions are contextually symbolic and suggest the conscious evocation of memory of a burdened and confined past that the students excruciatingly struggled for freedom initiated by their final examinations and offered outside the university environment. **Figure 2** captures the expressive memory in this category.

Figure 2. Inscriptions on relief and freedom.

4.3. Memory of gratitude and acknowledgments

Another category of T-shirt inscriptions worn by the students show expression of gratitude. For Seidlitz and Dienner[48], and Watkins[49], gratitude is a virtue that allows the accessibility and recollection of (un)pleasant circumstances in one's life which is believed to increase psychological stability, pleasure and possible rewards. The inscriptions that convey memories of gratitude as indicated on the T-shirts worn by the participants include: *God did it, only God can make a man, the grace of God saw me through, praise God for this feat, if no be God I for drop since* (I would have been a drop out, if not for God), *thank you Jesus, I thank myself I try* (I congratulate myself), *big sis if not for you BSc for no pure* (the possibility of having a BSc could not have been reality if not for my elder sister), *if no be my dad I for dey village* (if not for the sacrifices of daddy who sponsored my education, I could still be in the village), *thanks mum it has finished* (thanks mummy, I have concluded this phase), *thank you all that value me* and *thanks to some of my lecturers*. The writings express diverse gratitude, to God, to self, to relatives, to concerned persons and to some lecturers. Categorically, *may parents prayed while I studied it paid off I'm out! God did it, only God can make a man, the grace of God saw me through, praise God for this feat, if no be God I for drop since* and *thank you Jesus* are collective memories that express the supremacy, mercies and sufficient grace of (Christian) God to protect his believers and guide them to success. The texts on the T-shirts are indications of the religious nature of Nigerians. On this, Aremu[50] avers that Nigerian religious expressions are attributive to the sociocultural space of the participants who employ Biblical expressions to strengthen their faith. Also, *I thank myself I try* communicates the resilient dispositions of many Nigerians who surmount daring odds to introduce a promising narrative to their lives. This self-appreciation is a linguistic represented of horrible memory of long suffering and enduring trait amid challenges that finally paid off, it also denotes the category of students who laboured severely to sponsor themselves in the university. *Big sis if not for you BSc for no pure, if no be my dad I for dey village* and *thanks mum it has finished* are combined to reintroduce the memories and benefits derived from family ties. On this, Thomas, Liu and Umberson[51] assert that family relationship ties are viewed as pivotal in the consequential well-being and happiness of people. The separate gratitude by the different participants to the father, mother and sister underscores the importance Nigerians place on family roles, particularly in the provision of the needs of children by their parents and older siblings. Although access to education in the formal context is seen a right, the graduating students view it as privileges, given the economic hardship the citizens face. *Thank you all that value me* and *Thanks to some of my lecturers* are pointers to the memory of the selective few who were burdened for the progress of others and offered assistance in kindness and money for the students to attend to their educational needs. A participant recounts that, "I will be very ungrateful if I don't thank God and all those who assisted me in one way or the other throughout my studies, it has really not been easy." Another graduating student puts it thus, "I am a Christian and the Bible says in everything, we should give thanks. I am very grateful, my people laboured and toiled for me to have a university degree, I sincerely thank them all." The student's account in this context, according to Uwen and Ekpang[52], Uwen and Ukaegbu[53], demonstrates his supreme attachment to Christian religion, reverence to, and propagation of the

virtues and nature of God that resonates the tenets of Christianity arising from colonialism influence on Nigerians, particularly on its religious and linguistic legacies. From the theories used in this study, memory is constructed through the multimodal resources conveyed in the inscriptions within the time and space provided by the duration of the students' university education. The gratitude and acknowledgements as construed here, are remediation of the huddles of the past and the external influences (from the efforts and prayers of their parents) that facilitated the success marked by the final examinations. Memory here provides the determinants of remembering and forgetting as the relevance of the past event and the level of positive (or negative impact) it has on the person. This is shown in **Figure 3** below.

Figure 3. Inscriptions on gratitude and acknowledgements.

4.4. Memory of leadership and coordination

A leader is a person who coordinates and directs the affairs of other people towards the achievement of a particular goal. Ellah[54] asserts that leadership relates to the ability to initiate, direct and take responsibility for an action. This implies that leadership is demanding and crucial to the progress of any society or group of people. The coding of the memory of leadership and coordination is based on the accumulated knowledge of the task of leadership either as a course or a class representative. Such tasks include mediating between the students in the class and lecturer(s) in matters of fixing classes, reminding lecturers about classes, getting information from the lecturers to the students and vice versa, arranging for class venues (if it is a fixed class), coordinating other academic activities, and other duties. This is instantiated in **Figure 4** below.

Figure 4. Inscription on leadership and coordination.

The inscription in **Figure 4** above shows the evocation of memory of leadership. The text producer through the written mode *I DON LEAVE Class Rep FOR UNA* (I am relieved of the duties of a class representative to the continuing students) pragmatically deployed the text to exclude herself from, and construct freedom from the burden of leadership. The evocation of this memory situationally aligns with the particular context having completed her final degree examinations. Other inscriptions in this category include: *study group leader no easy too* (coordinating a study group is not easy too), *I don handover Parapo Presido* (I have successfully handed over as the president of the students of my local government area), *common dept president everybody don turn EFCC* (just being an ordinary president of my departmental students' association, every student has assumed the duties of an anti-graft agency) and *I don jump and pass una probe* (I have escaped the plan to probe me). Here, *I don handover Parapo President* reflects the task of coordinating activities of students from the same ethnocultural affiliation by the author of the inscription. *Common dept president don turn EFCC* evokes the memory of the quest for members of a group to demand for accountability. In the Nigerian context, EFCC (Economic Fraud and other related Crimes Commission) is statutorily empowered to investigate fraud related crimes. This is reflected in the position of students that has influenced the inscription of the T-shirt of one of the graduating students. *I don jump and pass una probe* recalls the contemplated probing of the writer who is getting away with it because he/she has completed studies in the university. Language here, is used to situate the experiential meaning of the participants' real world which the University environment defines. In the perspective of students, leadership, as it is in the larger society, is a complex exercise that demands reasonable expectations from the leader and the led. It is a socially situated practice that evolves through interactive engagements and collaborative activities among students where the leadership traits are revealed and adopted. Yamaguchi[55] maintains that students tilt towards success through competitive orientations in joint work which builds one's dominance and establishes leadership roles. A participant recalls that "students are members of very complex social groups, and leading them to the satisfaction of a majority is a heinous task". The insights from MDA and MT helped in situating the micro burden of leadership and coordination of course mates for the achievement of collective academic goal. The inscriptions instantiate the link between language (and multimodal resources) and memory construction. It shows the relationship between knowledge about something and memory of something that conditionally shape the persons' identity and attitudes.

4.5. Memory of challenges and perseverance

Challenges are the difficulties or obstacles that are encountered by an individual or group of individuals who are engaged in the actualisation of certain goals. In Nigeria, many students in public schools experience different challenges in the course of their academic pursuits. Some of such challenges include poverty, students' unrest, and incessant strikes by both academic and non-teaching staff of public institutions. Mathew[56] categorises the sources of challenges to include those induced by the university management, staff and the associated demands, fellow students and family backgrounds. These challenges are configured and reminisced as accumulated memory in T-shirt inscriptions of graduating students as we see in **Figure 5** below.

Figure 5 evokes the ugly experiences that are mentally retained, conjured and communicated through T-shirt inscriptions. The first text itemises the serial regrettable experiences to include: *4 YEARS + 1* (spent five years for a four-year programme), *66 COURSES and 8 SEMESTERS* (recalls the number of courses and semesters covered before the final examinations), *4 TIMES STRIKE* (evokes the memory on the number of strikes embarked upon by university staff that disrupted academic activities), *1 YEAR LOCKDOWN* (exemplifies the nationwide closure of schools in Nigeria and other parts of the world as a result of the ravaging COVID-19 pandemic) and *END SARS* (SARS-special anti-robbery squad of the Nigerian police) captures the slogan used by the youth nationwide to protest the alleged police brutality of citizens which ignited social

unrest in 2020. The T-shirt wearer also reminisced on the challenge of *ASUU* (Academic Staff Union of Universities) strikes and the effect of *lockdown* as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. The wearer goes further to recall that despite the challenge of *SAPA* (the students' slangy expression for impoverished condition) which they had to face as students, their resilient spirit paid off as they *still graduated*. Other inscriptions in this category include *poverty dealt with me graciously, I almost quitted, even fellow students couldn't help!* and *I wore three shirts in a semester,* among others. The texts separately commit to the memory of how poverty showed some kindness to the author, how one almost gave up the struggle to acquire a degree, instantiation of abandonment by privileged students and the repeated use of three shirts for a semester. These re-enacted experiences capture the multifaceted challenges faced by the participants and the persevering miens that culminated into success. The communicative functions of the texts corroborate the position of Ogunode, Audu and Ahaotu[57] that students in Nigerian tertiary institutions persevere to graduate in spite of myriad of challenges they face. Such challenges include: financial problems, frequents strikes by university staff, inadequate infrastructural facilities and poor academic services. A participant recalled that, "The period of study was full of resurfacing challenges, we only had to persevere to this stage of writing final examinations." This, in another study by Uwen and Eyang[58], presents the students with courageous, gallantry, perseverance and rugged attributes required to achieve tasking goals. MT resonates the capacity of humans to recall the past in negotiating perceptions in the discourses in the present. The multimodal elements in the inscriptions helped in the revelation of an unpleasant past. The narrations through the inscriptions collectively objectify the memories of the past as a reflection of the myriad of challenges and the navigation to success through perseverance.

Figure 5. Inscriptions on challenges and perseverance.

5. Semiotic resources in T-shirt inscriptions

This section focuses on the multimodal resources in the selected data. It makes use of Kress and van Leeuwen's[30] three metafunctional meanings of analysis: representational, interactive and compositional to account for the complementarity of verbal and visual modes of communication in the production and explication of meaning. The representational function represents an idea about the world, interactive function represents something about the writers or speakers and readers or hearers; while the compositional function deals with the truth-value of the resources. From the representational perspective, the semiotic resources indicate that the main messages and ideas of the inscriptions are predominantly represented in colours and texts. The selected data reveal that the semiotic artefact shows the use of white and blue colours. The choice of these colours was deliberate as they are used to index purity, transparency, truth, confidence, modesty, among others. The participants are expected, as they leave to mix with the complexities of the larger society,

to show positive traits of purity, transparency and truth because a graduate needs to be pure, transparent and truthful in their daily endeavours to be trusted and accountable within the situated social context.

At the interactive level, the semiotic resources reveal the social participants interacting within the image in order to convey meanings. The social participants are the graduating students who are the text producers and a segment of the university community who represents the text consumers. The texts, by the participatory culture of the students, are conceived as interactional devices between the authors and the peculiar university environment that defines the motivations behind them. The combination of semiotic resources and printed texts which describe the compositional level, are combined to enhance better understanding of memories that conjured up by the graduating students. The synergy between the verbal and visual modes in the inscriptions enables the readers to better appreciate the experiences of Nigerian students. It is against this premise that Ellah and Ekoro[59] argue that human communication does not exclusively depend on verbal language, but also on some semiotic properties which include pictures, colours and other semiotic features to function. The interface provides the presuppositional clues that decrypt the contextual meanings of the expressions within the social context of members of the university community.

6. Conclusion

The study has revealed that the use of scripted T-shirts by Nigerian university graduating students has become a reoccurring participatory and expressive youth culture. The choice of T-shirts as a communicative outlet account for the innovations that situate emerging youth cultures in the contemporaneous domains for message dissemination. The inscriptions and participants' opinions from the subpopulation of students in Unical and Crutech showed that students in both universities have common experiences that evoke collective memories. The strands of memories evoked by the participants include achievement and self-fulfillment, relief and freedom, gratitude and acknowledgements, leadership and coordination, and challenges and perseverance. The coding revealed a myriad of challenges faced by the Nigerian students undergoing studies in the universities induced by poor funding from the government, management policies, staff attitudes towards students, lack of the desired cooperation from fellow students, poor family backgrounds and other demands for university education. The texts and their producers are significations for a resilient youth population that is consciously determined to prosper amid discouraging odds.

The linguistic choices in the texts are coded in Standard English, Nigerian Pidgin, elements of Nigerian indigenous languages and the participants' slangy expressions. These linguistic components are combined to re-enact the configuration of the Nigerian sociolinguistic milieu, represented in language practices in the university environment, and to re-establish youth creativity in the manipulation of linguistic elements to communicate their worldview. This practice among graduating students succinctly foregrounds the university as a distinct speech community with devised and narrowed communication system within its mode of intelligibility. This makes the texts, the producers and consumers as a communication chain with explicatory tools defined by the social context and shared presuppositional knowledge of members of the university community. The students utilised the liberating context of the University environment as a fertile site for self-engagement in the emerging youth culture of self-assertiveness and expression their myriad of positive (and negative experiences). By so doing, according to Uwen, Ghevolor and Bassey[60], the different experiences manifest in the diverse emotions expressed, and portray the participants' characteristics who manage agonizing circumstances and celebrate in pleasant situations.

The study succinctly presented a clear development of the notion of the relationship between the appropriate deployment of language and memory construction which adds value to the field of memory studies. Drawing from the various T-inscriptions, it is clear that the study has expanded on previous domains in which

memory is involved in contesting situated meanings, personal or social group's ideologies and other emerging dominant constructs identified within the youth's expressive and participatory culture in contemporary societies. The diversity and non-linearity of the memories communicated through the inscriptions on the T-shirts paved way for the construction of the intertwining relationship between language, memory and forgetting, devised in revealing, revising, recontextualising and contesting dominant construction of dominant sociocultural constructs in heterogeneous societies.

The study no doubt has limitations. This is because, the limited days within which the graduating students wrote their last examinations could not provide enough time for the researchers, especially to engage more interviewees to deepen the discourse more. Also, the euphoria of the celebration moods of the participants could alter their positioning compared with the (literal) meanings of inscriptions on their T-shirts. This is in addition to the high number of students who were consulted but seemed uninterested in the exercise. As Uwen et al.[61] suggest, the study of this nature is also limited by the individual, sociocultural and ethnoreligious beliefs of the participants which could provide restraints to divulging certain information. The limitations, however, do not in any sense invalidate the findings which have provided genuine clues on the (implied) meanings of the inscriptions and semiotic impulses, and the motivations that informed the production. Also, given that the study appears to be novel, it is recommended that since the use of marked T-shirts is a trending practice among the focus group across Nigerian universities, more researches should be carried out to ascertain the similarities and/or differences and the motivations behind the practice. This way, it would be easy to situate the different and/or similar experiences of graduating Nigerian students and the inscriptions they use to construct such memories.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, GOU and SME; methodology, GOU; software, SME; validation, GOU and SME; formal analysis, GOU; investigation, SME; resources, GOU; data curation, SME; writing—original draft preparation, GOU; writing—review and editing, GOU; visualization, SME; supervision, SME; project administration, GOU. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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