



# The Meme-ification of Misogyny: Semiotic Construction of Gender Stereotypes and Stigma in Nigerian Online Forums Discussing Paternity Fraud

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## ABSTRACT

While extensive research has examined gender stereotypes and misogyny in digital media, the specific role of memes in perpetuating these issues, particularly regarding paternity fraud, has received limited attention. This study, therefore, addresses this gap by investigating how Nigerian online forums depict gender stereotypes and misogyny through memes. Data were collected from Nairaland and Twitter over six months (January to June 2024), with a focus on semiotic analysis to uncover ideological messages. Using Kress's Multimodal Social Semiotics and Van Dijk's Social Cognitive Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis as the analytical framework, the study identifies five prevalent stereotypes: women as sexual objects, deceitful, irresponsible, unreliable, and perpetrators of infidelity. These stereotypes are constructed through hyperbolic imagery, ironic captions, derogatory language, and culturally loaded symbols. The linguistic strategies employed include pejorative terms, humor, and colloquial expressions that trivialize serious issues and reinforce negative perceptions. The findings reveal how these representations reflect and perpetuate misogynistic attitudes within Nigerian society. The study concludes that memes significantly shape and sustain harmful gender stereotypes, highlighting the need for critical awareness in digital content creation and consumption to combat the spread of misogynistic ideologies.

**Keywords:** Gender Stereotypes; Misogyny, Digital Media; Memes; Paternity Fraud; Semiotic Analysis; Nigerian Online Forums.

## 1. Introduction

Paternity fraud, where a man is misled into believing he is the biological father of a child, has become a significant issue in Nigeria due to complex social, cultural, and legal factors. The advent of DNA testing has highlighted alarmingly high rates of paternity fraud, with Nigeria now ranking second globally, behind Jamaica (Premium times, September 18, 2021; Peterside, 2021; Obalowu & Rahim, 2022). Reports indicate that between 30% and 60% of children tested are not biologically related to their presumed fathers. For example, a Lagos-based DNA expert found that 30% of men tested were not the biological fathers of the children they raised (Ayetoto-Oladehinde, 2024), while Smart DNA reported a 26.12% rate of negative paternity results (The Punch, 16th December 2023). This phenomenon has severe psychological, social, and economic implications. Psychologically, men discovering they are not the biological fathers of children

they have raised often face mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, which can lead to broken homes and strained relationships (Adegbite, 2016). Socially, the stigma associated with paternity fraud can result in ostracization and reputational damage for the women involved, given Nigerian society's strict views on fidelity and motherhood. Economically, men may incur substantial financial burdens from raising children who are not biologically theirs, leading to legal disputes over custody and child support (Efut & Chiagoziem, 2021). Furthermore, the inadequacies of the Nigerian legal framework in addressing paternity fraud have been noted, with existing laws failing to adequately protect the rights of deceived men (Perez-Vaisvidovsk, 2019).

The rise of the internet and the proliferation of social media platforms have revolutionized communication and information sharing. In Nigeria, online forums and social media have become vital spaces for public discourse (Onanuga, 2020), offering a platform for diverse voices and opinions. Platforms such as Nairaland, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become central to discussions on various topics, including paternity fraud. These platforms facilitate real-time sharing of experiences, opinions, and advice, creating virtual communities where individuals can connect and engage in discourse. The anonymity provided by online platforms allows for open and honest discussions that might be challenging to have in person due to societal stigmas and cultural taboos (Abdulyakeen & Yusuf 2022). Meme-ification in this study refers to the creation and dissemination of memes as a dominant form of communication that “shapes perceptions and discussions on various issues” (Osisanwo & Falade, 2024). With approximately 2 million memes circulated daily (Meme Statistics, 2023), they serve as powerful tools for conveying ideas quickly and humorously. Memes often condense complex social narratives into easily digestible visual and textual formats, making them potent carriers of ideological messages (Alfred, 2019). While social media discussions on paternity fraud often focus on its legal and ethical implications, the cultural discourse around this issue frequently reflects gendered and misogynistic narratives. Memes, due to their rapid spread and emotional resonance, play a significant role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes. They provide a platform for individuals to express frustrations, share experiences, generate empathy, and critique societal norms in a humorous and accessible way (Oyemade & Adeagbo, 2020). However, the meme-ification of serious issues like paternity fraud can also trivialize the experiences of those affected, reducing complex emotional and social problems to mere jokes. Furthermore, memes can perpetuate misogynistic content and reinforce gender stereotypes, contributing to the stigmatization of women and the normalization of harmful attitudes. Thus, this paper examines the phenomenon of paternity fraud—a contentious and stigmatized issue within Nigerian society—and how it is represented and reinforced through memes on social media platforms.

## 2. Literature Review

The digital media landscape has become a critical platform for examining gender stereotypes and misogyny. Powell et al. (2017) and Santoniccolo et al. (2023) provide compelling evidence that trolling and harassment on social media are not isolated phenomena but are pervasive mechanisms that propagate the objectification and degradation of women. Sobieraj (2020) adds that these platforms often serve as echo chambers that reinforce harmful gender narratives, amplifying misogynistic views through algorithmic amplification and social feedback loops. Vickery and Everbach (2018) explore how technology mediates digital harassment, demonstrating that the mediation of harassment is not just a technical issue but a deeply social one, influenced by the very design of digital platforms. The examination of gender stereotyping on social media platforms is further advanced by Saluja and Thilaka (2021), who analyze how Twitter is used to reinforce gender stereotypes of female politicians, undermining their public roles and effectiveness. Esposito (2023) extends this by focusing on visual semiotics, showing how misogynistic imagery related to female leadership is systematically deployed to undermine women's authority. Wilhelm (2021) discusses gendered visibility, illustrating how digital platforms can either amplify or obscure gender discrimination depending on the context of exposure and engagement. Drakett et al. (2018), Athoi (2024), and Peng et al. (2023) focus on stereotypes and sexism in memes, whereas Simões et al. (2021), Ghaffari (2023), and Kavanagh et al. (2019) explore media representations of aging women, celebrities, and sports. Daniels (2021), Snyder (2022), and Sobieraj (2018) discuss

strategies for navigating and resisting cyber misogyny. These studies collectively highlight how digital anonymity and reach entrench harmful gender narratives while also enabling resistance and discourse.

In the realm of memes, Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Shalevska (2018) and Ostanina-Olszewska and Majdzińska-Koczorowicz (2019) analyze the socio-linguistic and cognitive features of memes, revealing how they embed and perpetuate societal norms. Grundlingh (2018) conceptualizes memes as speech acts, showing how they function as performative tools that can either challenge or reinforce cultural stereotypes. Milner (2016) and Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) discuss the multimodal nature of memes, highlighting how the interplay of text and image creates complex messages that reflect and shape public discourse. Fubara (2020) and Holm (2021) investigate how humor and irony in memes both reflect and influence societal norms, pointing out how these elements can both critique and reinforce existing stereotypes. Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018) and Boiko et al. (2024) discuss meme templates as global expressive repertoires, showing how memes adapt across cultures while maintaining core thematic elements. In Nigeria, Ugoala (2020), Sani (2022) and Idegbekwe et al. (2020) analyze Nigerian English in memes during events like COVID-19, reflecting on how memes serve as a medium for cultural expression and societal commentary. Onanuga (2020), Alfred (2019), Oyemade & Adeagbo (2020), Bamgbose (2020), Osisanwo & Falade (2024), and Ope-Davies et al. (2023) analyze their ideological and humorous elements in Nigerian political and social issues. Methodologically, Lugea (2019) and Zahoor (2020) use pragma-stylistics and linguistic analysis, and Adebomi (2020), Ajayi & Akinrinlola (2021), and Falade (2022), revealing their role in discussing political and social issues. These studies collectively demonstrate how memes function as speech acts, adapt to diverse contexts, and influence cultural dialogues globally and in Nigeria

Regarding paternity fraud, Draper (2007) Jacobs (2004), Browne-Barbour (2015), Rogus (2014), Ayres (2017), and Ani & Chime (2021) explore the legal and ethical dimensions, including the impact on family dynamics and compensation challenges. Efut and Chiagoziem (2021) and Okebie and Konstantinidou (2021) evaluate legal mechanisms, such as the tort of deceit, highlighting their effectiveness and limitations. Bourne et al. (2023) and Obalowu and Rahim (2022) examine societal attitudes towards paternity fraud and marital infidelity, showing how cultural norms influence responses to fraud. Ololajulo (2018) and Adannaya (2023) focus on community practices like baby factories, while Adegbite (2016) and Osho et al. (2020) tackle the challenges of DNA testing in Nigeria. Philosophical and psychological perspectives from Perez-Vaisvidovsky (2019), Cutas & Smajdor (2020), Nwankwo (2021), Zeghiche et al. (2023), and Adannaya (2023) highlight the emotional and social impacts of paternity fraud, underscoring the complex interplay between legal, societal, and technological factors. Collectively, these studies highlight the complex interplay between legal frameworks, societal attitudes, and technological advancements in addressing paternity fraud.

While research has examined gender stereotypes and misogyny in digital media, the role of memes in perpetuating these issues, particularly concerning paternity fraud, is underexplored. Existing studies on memes often focus on their linguistic, cognitive, and pragmatic aspects, neglecting their role in reinforcing misogyny. Similarly, although paternity fraud has been studied from legal, ethical, and cultural perspectives, its depiction in online memes, especially in Nigerian forums, lacks thorough analysis. This research addresses this gap by examining how memes intersect with paternity fraud and gender stereotypes in Nigerian online forums. Through a semiotic analysis, it aims to reveal how misogyny and gender stereotypes are propagated in memes and seeks to answer: How do memes related to paternity fraud reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes in Nigerian society? What cognitive and multimodal strategies are employed in these memes to convey ideological messages?

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a discourse approach, utilizing semiotic analysis to explore the meaning-making processes of memes related to paternity fraud and gender stereotypes. Semiotic analysis, as defined by Chandler (2007), involves examining the signs and symbols within a cultural context

to understand how meanings are constructed and communicated. Data were collected from Nairaland and Twitter due to their popularity and active discussions on social issues (Akano, 2024, like paternity fraud and gender stereotypes). Memes were purposively sampled for relevance to the research topic, focusing on those posted between January and June 2024, a period with increased discussion on these issues. A total of 20 memes (ten from each platform) were collected, each receiving between 500 and 20,000 likes, comments, and shares. The memes were coded and categorized to identify recurring themes in their visual and textual elements. A detailed semiotic analysis was conducted on both visual components (images, symbols, metaphors) and textual elements (language, phrases) to assess their contribution to gender stereotypes and stigma. Ethical considerations included ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of meme creators, respecting cultural sensitivities, and handling the subject matter with integrity.

#### 4. Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Kress's Multimodal Social Semiotics with a blend of Van Dijk's Social Cognitive Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Kress' (2010) multimodal social semiotic approach examines the effectiveness of verbal and visual semiotic resources in the context of meaning production. Kress' framework builds on the foundational principles of social semiotics, which sees participants in semiotic activities as interacting within specific social contexts. As articulated by Hodge (2014), social semiotics emphasizes that "speakers and writers or other participants in semiotic activity are connected and interacting in a variety of ways in concrete social contexts" (p. 1). This perspective highlights the importance of understanding how meaning is not fixed in signs themselves but is dynamically constructed through their use in particular social settings. Kress' (2010) multimodal social semiotics extends this view by incorporating the role of various semiotic resources—both verbal and visual—in shaping meaning. According to Kress (2010), semiotic resources encompass a range of modes, including images, language, sounds, gestures, and spatial arrangements. Each of these resources has its own affordances and limitations, influencing how messages are conveyed and interpreted. For example, in a popular meme format that pairs a humorous or ironic image with a text overlay, the image, often sourced from popular culture or internet trends, serves as a visual semiotic resource that captures attention and elicits an emotional response. The text overlay, meanwhile, provides context or commentary that gives the image meaning, often utilizing humor, satire, or irony. The combination of these elements is not random but is strategically designed to enhance the meme's effectiveness in communication.

Furthermore, Kress (2010) argues that the interpretation of these multimodal texts is deeply influenced by the social, cultural, and historical contexts of both creators and audiences. This means that the meanings assigned to different semiotic resources can vary significantly depending on cultural contexts (Van Leeuwen, 2005). In his approach, Kress introduces the concept of design, which involves the intentional selection and arrangement of semiotic resources to achieve specific communicative goals. Design is seen as a deliberate act, where choices about which modes to use and how to combine them are made with an awareness of their impact on the audience. This perspective underscores the role of communication as an act of design, where meaning is constructed through the thoughtful integration of various semiotic elements. In examining verbal and visual semiotic modes, the study follows Kress' emphasis on context, design, interpretation, and meaning potentials. It explores how multimodal elements of memes—combining text, image, and cultural context—to reveal how they construct and communicate gendered stereotypes

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) investigates how language reflects and shapes power and ideology within societal contexts (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2001). It views language as a social practice, influenced by and influencing social conditions (Fairclough, 2013), and examines biases in political discourse (Igwebuike & Chimuanya, 2023). This study uses van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, which links discourse, cognition, and society, focusing on how ideologies—abstract mental systems organizing social attitudes—are cognitively represented through language (van Dijk, 2001). The theory focuses on mental models, which are internal representations that help individuals interpret and simplify complex information based on their prior knowledge (van Dijk, 2006). These models shape how people understand discourse, such as narratives about paternity

fraud, influenced by societal beliefs and gender roles. Context models, a type of mental model, explain why different groups interpret the same discourse differently (van Dijk, 2009). Ideologies, embedded in social cognition, inform and justify social practices and power relations, affecting how issues like paternity fraud are framed and often placing moral responsibility on women. Discursive practices involve the use of language and semiotic resources in social contexts, revealing how memes, through their visual and textual elements, can reinforce or challenge stereotypes and ideologies (van Dijk, 1997). Analyzing memes with this approach helps uncover the cognitive and ideological frameworks that shape and reflect broader social narratives

Together, these theories enable a comprehensive exploration of how memes convey and perpetuate societal beliefs and power dynamics.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed that the memes perpetuated harmful gender stereotypes and stigma against women. The visual elements depicted five predominant stereotypes related to paternity fraud—women as sexual objects, deceitful or betraying, perpetrators of infidelity, irresponsible mothers, and unreliable or untrustworthy individuals—while the textual elements reinforced these stereotypes with sexist and misogynistic language. This are discussed in detail below.

### 5.1. Construction of Women as Sexual Object

The analysis of memes reveals a troubling trend in the portrayal of women, where they are often reduced to mere sexual objects through gender stereotypes and objectification. This phenomenon reflects deeply rooted patriarchal ideologies that place men in dominant positions while relegating women to subordinate roles. Such portrayals diminish women to their sexual attributes, emphasizing physical appearance and sexual allure over their intelligence, capability, and individuality. This reductionist view is pervasive across media and cultural contexts, leading to the devaluation and dehumanization of women. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate how these stereotypes are perpetuated in the discourse around paternity fraud.

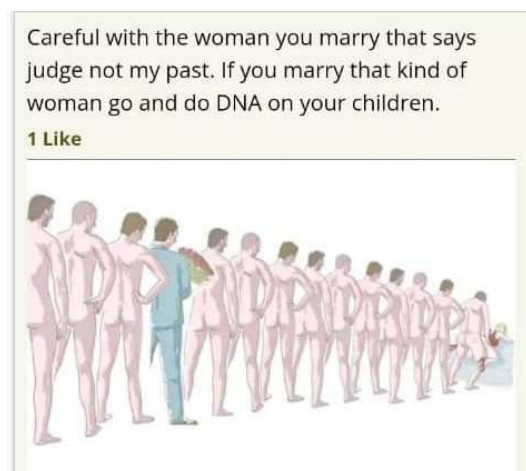


Figure 1

In Figure 1, the visual elements of the meme consist of a queue of naked men, depicted as waiting their turn with a single woman. This depiction reflects a prevalent societal norm within patriarchal contexts, such as Nigeria, where a woman's value is often judged solely through their utility for male gratification. In Nigeria, there is a common practice where women with noticeable physical features, such as prominent breasts and curvaceous buttocks, receive preferential treatment from men. These women are often given more attention, job opportunities, and gifts simply because of their appearance. This preference implicates that physical attributes overshadow a woman's skills, intelligence, or character. As a result, women who don't fit these physical ideals find it harder to get the same chances. The imagery of men lined up in a sequence to "consume" the woman in Figure 1 is a stark representation of the sexual commodification of women, reducing them to mere objects

of male desire. The repetitive and identical portrayal of the men emphasizes the reduction of the woman to a single dimension—her sexual appeal. The implication here is that men are interested in women mainly for sexual gains, as evidenced by their willingness to “queue up.” Once these desires are satisfied, many men shift from affectionate behavior to disinterest, resulting in women often being left without a committed partner. The narrative conveyed in the memes taps into a common complaint among women in Nigerian societies that men are primarily motivated by sexual desires. The initial displays of love and affection are portrayed as deceptive tactics to lure women into sexual relationships. Once men achieve their goal, their interest diminishes, leaving women feeling used and abandoned. Moreover, in many communities, there is a tacit understanding that single women are often passed around among male friends. A woman, unknowingly, might be introduced to a man’s friends after being intimate with him, only to realize later that she was merely a sexual object to all of them. This shared cognitive knowledge is vividly reflected in the memes, where explicit sexual imagery at the end of the line metaphorically depicts commodification of women and the reduction of their worth to mere sexual objects.

The culmination of this pattern often leads to societal pressure for women to marry, as illustrated in Figure 1 by the imagery of a man in formal attire holding flowers, depicted as a prospective husband. This portrayal reinforces the notion that a woman’s ultimate role is to settle into marriage, regardless of any prior demeaning treatment she may have experienced. The meme producer taps into the shared societal expectation that women’s worth is intrinsically tied to a committed relationship. In Nigeria, older single women, particularly those in their forties, or those who are divorced, often face stigma. They are frequently labeled as having some form of physical or spiritual issue or as being too stubborn to submit to male authority. This societal stigma pressures women into marriage or compels them to remain in toxic relationships. Moreover, the meme’s depiction of the prospective husband positioned among naked men in Figure 1 not only portrays women as objects of sexual pleasure for men but also suggests that even after a woman marries, there are still others waiting to ‘take their turn.’ In the Nigerian context, women with a perceived sexual past are stigmatized because of the belief that their bodies have been ‘enjoyed’ by other men, rendering their current or future husbands undeserving. This perception implies that the ‘better parts’ of a woman’s body have already been taken by others. This portrayal perpetuates the idea that women are inherently promiscuous, and that marriage alone will not shield them from ongoing objectification and societal pressure. Such objectification is directly related to fears surrounding paternity fraud, which is the concern that a child’s biological father may not be the same as the legal father.

The accompanying text, “Careful with the woman you marry that says judge not my past. If you marry that kind of woman, go and do DNA on your children,” reinforces this stereotype by implying that a woman’s past sexual experiences render her untrustworthy. This sentiment resonates deeply within many Nigerian communities, where it is believed that women with a sexual history find it difficult to be content or sexually satisfied by their husbands alone. There is a pervasive belief that even if a woman has ceased engaging in relationships with multiple partners, she cannot fully abandon such behavior after marriage. This presumption leads to the notion that these women are more likely to commit infidelity, resulting in concerns about paternity fraud. The stigma extends beyond the individual woman, affecting her husband as well. In public discourse, the community often excludes husbands of women with known sexual histories from respectable circles, thus shaming both parties. The cultural narrative suggests that marrying a woman with a obvious past brings shame and dishonor, not only to her but also to her spouse. This sentiment is closely tied to the fear of paternity fraud, as it implies that such women are more likely to be deceitful about their sexual history, raising doubts about the paternity of their children. Consequently, men are often encouraged to abandon such women, perpetuating a cycle of rejection and isolation.

The meme producer taps into this cultural bias, using the caption to reinforce these stereotypes. The lexical choice “that kind of woman” serves as a discursive adjective, painting women with sexual histories in a negative light and shaming them. This phrasing activates a gender-related schema, casting women as deceitful and promiscuous while objectifying them. The text presupposes that women who request, “judge not my past,” are concealing their promiscuous behaviors, suggesting

an inherent distrustworthiness. The use of imperative phrases like “Careful,” “If you marry,” and “go and do DNA on your children” conveys a cautionary tone directed at men, implying that women with multiple past partners pose a significant threat or risk. These discursive linguistic choices are designed to foster suspicion and reinforce existing power dynamics, which perpetuate gender-based discrimination. The meme, with its visual and textual elements, fosters a culture of suspicion and mistrust, particularly in the realm of family and paternity, reinforcing the notion that a woman’s sexual behavior is a critical determinant of her partner’s trust and the legitimacy of their children.



Figure 2

The objectification of women in Figure 2 is linked to paternity fraud by reinforcing stereotypes about their sexual histories. The side-by-side image comparison judges a woman’s worth based on her past sexual experiences. The left image, labeled “Her Past,” depicts a woman in a compromising sexual position, with a sexual partner gripping her hair. This visual not only objectifies her but also dehumanizes her by focusing solely on her sexual actions. This reflects the behavior where attention in the society is more on the sexual behavior of the women and that of the man is simply normalized and less criticised. In Nigeria, traditional gender roles reflect a deep-rooted patriarchy, pressuring women to uphold standards of sexual behavior and purity. Women are expected to remain chaste before marriage, with any deviation leading to severe social consequences. This expectation is not merely a personal or private matter but is intricately woven into the societal fabric, influencing family honor and community status. A woman’s sexual purity heavily influences her social standing and marriage prospects. Perceived promiscuity can lead to social ostracism and reduced marriage opportunities, which are crucial for social status and security in many Nigerian communities. The pressure to conform results in both psychological and social penalties for deviations from these norms, as ‘marriageability’ is closely tied to sexual purity, with past indiscretions potentially jeopardizing a woman’s future prospects. This view perpetuates a cycle of judgment and exclusion, reinforcing the patriarchal notion that a woman’s value is contingent upon her ability to conform to male-dominated standards.

Figure 2 serves as a reflection of these deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes. By suggesting that a woman’s past sexual behavior undermines her current worth and respectability, the meme reinforces the stereotype that a woman’s value is intrinsically tied to her sexual purity and her relationship with a man. The discursive relevance of the use of the phrase “Her Past” serves as a metaphor, suggesting that a woman’s sexual history is inherently shameful or regrettable. This perpetuates a social cognition of women’s sexuality, contributing to broader cultural anxieties about paternity fraud that a woman’s sexual behavior is inherently linked to her trustworthiness and the legitimacy of her children. The caption “You and Her” further amplifies this patriarchal narrative by implying that a woman’s worth is determined by her adherence to male standards, reducing her identity and value to her sexual history and its perceived impact on her family. In this context, concerns about paternity fraud become a manifestation of broader societal fears regarding women’s sexual behavior. The anxiety surrounding paternity fraud reflects deep-seated

fears about the integrity of the family unit and the legitimacy of children born within it. These fears are often rooted in the patriarchal belief that a woman's sexual behavior directly impacts the legitimacy and stability of the family. As such, accusations of paternity fraud are not just about individual cases but are emblematic of larger anxieties about women's roles and behaviors within the family structure. The meme's message that a woman's past sexual behavior makes her less respectable or trustworthy contribute to the suspicion that she might deceive her partner about the paternity of their children.

The normalization of these stereotypes through memes like Figure 1 and Figure 2 not only perpetuates the objectification of women but also upholds a societal framework that legitimizes the control and policing of women's sexuality. The alignment of these stereotypes with the issue of paternity fraud illustrates how cultural narratives that devalue women based on their sexual history contribute to broader anxieties about family legitimacy and trust. By portraying women with sexual pasts as less trustworthy, the visual and textual elements of the memes reinforce the notion that their past actions have direct implications for their partners and children, thus perpetuating a cycle of mistrust and stigma surrounding paternity.

## 5.2. Construction of Women as deceitful/betrayal

The analysis of memes exposes a recurring narrative that portrays women as deceitful and unfaithful, particularly within the context of paternity fraud. This portrayal reinforces a stereotypes that foster mistrust and insecurity in relationships. Rooted in patriarchal ideologies, these memes undermine women's integrity and suggest that they are inherently deceptive. This construction is evident in the memes analyzed, which align with traditional societal views that stigmatize women for their sexual behavior and autonomy. Figures 3 and 4 vividly illustrate how these stereotypes are perpetuated.

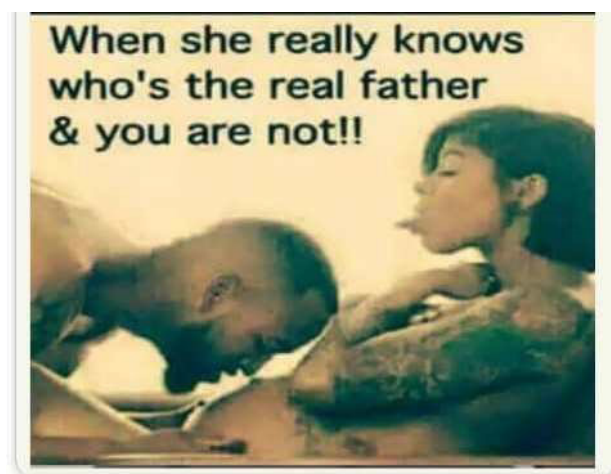


Figure 3

Historically, women's roles have been largely defined by their relationships with men—whether as daughters, wives, or mothers— thus limiting their autonomy. In Nigeria's patriarchal society, gender roles enforce strict expectations on women, requiring them to submit to male authority and be fully transparent with their husbands. Women are expected to share all information with their spouses, and any hint of secrecy is often met with suspicion. When women act independently, especially regarding personal or sexual matters, they are frequently seen as deceitful or betraying their husbands. This mistrust is rooted in the belief that women who assert their autonomy are hiding something dangerous or harmful, reinforcing the perception of women as untrustworthy. In Figure 3, the meme's portrayal of a pregnancy photoshoot, where the man is kissing the woman's belly, is a gesture traditionally symbolizing affection and anticipation of fatherhood. However, the woman's smirk and playful gesture of sticking out her tongue introduce an element of suspicion and potential deceit. This visual framing plays into cultural narratives that view women with suspicion, particularly when they exhibit behaviours that deviate from traditional expectations. The woman's smirk in the meme implies that she might be concealing information about the child's paternity.

This implication taps into a broader cultural bias in Nigeria, where women who make independent decisions about their sexuality or reproductive health are often viewed with distrust.

The imagery and caption of the meme—When she really knows who's the real father & you are not!!— amplifies the connection to paternity fraud. This directly engages with social cognitive processes by appealing to and reinforcing existing stereotypes about women. The lexical use of “really knows” implies that the woman possesses a certain knowledge concealed or not immediately apparent to others, particularly the man. The lexical choice “real father” carries significant implications. By implying that there is a more “real” father than the man depicted, the meme subtly questions the legitimacy of the man’s presumed paternity. This choice positions the woman as the sole possessor of this “hidden truth,” reinforcing the stereotype that women are deceitful and manipulative in familial matters. This dichotomy between the “real” father and the man portrayed in the meme suggests a fundamental mistrust of the woman’s word and actions, further accentuated by the playful yet sinister tone implied by her smirk. The meme’s depiction thus mirrors broader societal anxieties about paternity fraud by framing women’s independence and private decisions as inherently suspicious. It suggests that any control a woman exercises over information related to paternity, whether regarding financial dealings or reproductive health, is a threat to established power dynamics and familial stability. This narrative perpetuates a cognitive schemata where women’s autonomy is viewed as a threat rather than a personal right, and any deviation from traditional expectations is framed as deceitful or immoral.



Figure 4

In many cultures, including parts of Nigeria, there is a prevailing social narrative that normalizes or excuses male infidelity, rooted in patriarchal beliefs that grant men a greater social license for extramarital affairs. In many scandals related to infidelity and paternity fraud that spark online discussions, typically, men’s actions in these situations are overlooked, while women face lasting damage to their reputations. This highlights the societal double standards and provide context for the meme’s commentary. The discourse design of Figure 4 employs a blend of visual and verbal resources to convey a specific narrative about gender and infidelity. The meme use humor to highlight the disparity in how male and female actions are judged. The meme features a well-known child actor from Nigerian Nollywood movies, depicted with a skeptical expression, hands on his hips, which adds a touch of irony. The contrast between the child’s usual innocent image and his serious, questioning pose creates a humorous effect. This visual twist not only highlights the situation described in the caption but also plays with gender stereotypes in a funny way.

The caption’s use of Nigerian Pidgin English (“Na men dey cheat, but na women dey fear DNA test”) is a discursive choice that makes the message more relatable to a Nigerian audience, reinforcing the stereotype in a culturally specific manner. Pidgin is widely spoken across Nigeria and serves as a lingua franca that cuts across ethnic and class divides (Obiegbu, 2016). It allows for a more intimate, relatable communication style, making the message of the meme resonate with a broader audience. The contrast in the use of “men” as the subject of the material process “cheat” and “women” as the subject of the mental process “fear” implies that the woman, who is

responsible for the child's paternity, is capable of lying about it, reflecting entrenched societal beliefs. This verbal construction mirrors cognitive models that depict women as more likely to deceive about paternity. Thus, in the Nigerian socio-cultural context, the fear of "paternity fraud" is disproportionately directed at women. This fear often leads to demands for DNA tests at childbirth and harsh judgments of women's perceived sexual transgressions. The humor in the meme's visual and textual elements critiques and subtly normalizes this double standard, presenting it as a common societal observation, making it more digestible and less overtly offensive to audiences, thereby reducing resistance to the message. By supporting a misogynistic narrative, the meme reinforces existing biases and contributes to ongoing debates about gender stereotypes and the policing of women's behavior. It undermines efforts to promote gender equality by dehumanizing women and positioning them as objects of suspicion, thereby perpetuating harmful stereotypes that influence both social attitudes and legal practices.

### 5.3. Construction of Women as Irresponsible/Mother

The analysis of memes exposes a prevalent stereotype that portrays women as irresponsible, particularly concerning their roles as mothers and partners. This portrayal reinforces traditional gender roles, which position men as the primary providers and women as caretakers of the home. The meme analyzed below illustrates how this stereotype perpetuates outdated expectations and biases about women's responsibilities and behavior.

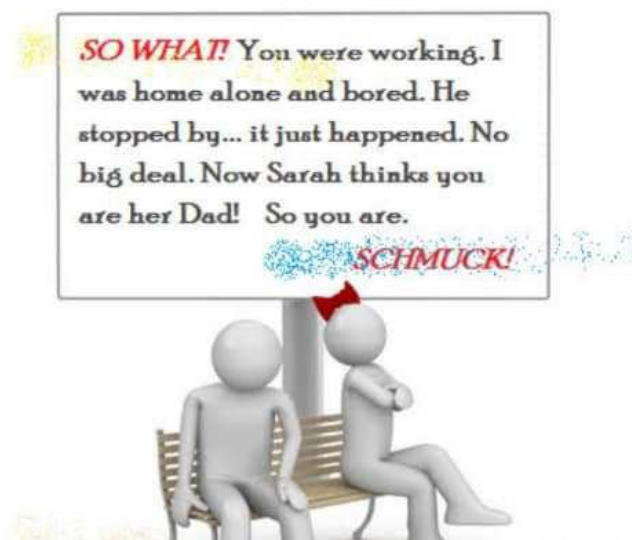


Figure 5

The meme in Figure 5 captures a narrative where a woman engages in infidelity while her partner is away working, with the caption, "You were working. I was alone at home and bored. I stopped by.... It just happened. It's no big deal. Now Sarah thinks you are her dad. So you are." The accompanying visual animation depicts dummy and faceless figures: one with the right hand on the lap and the left hand on the bench, and the other with arms folded, legs crossed, and head bent. This visual and textual construction critiques and reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes, particularly in relation to paternity fraud.

In Nigerian society, traditional gender roles often place the responsibility of primary breadwinning on men, while women are expected to manage domestic duties and child-rearing. This cultural expectation can restrict women's economic opportunities and professional growth, as they may be discouraged from pursuing careers or struggle to balance work and family responsibilities. Many women, who take on informal or low-paying jobs to support their families, often find their contributions undervalued. The societal norm often expects women to prioritize family and motherhood, sacrificing personal ambitions and economic pursuits. Deviating from these norms can result in harsh judgment and reinforce the stereotype of women as irresponsible. Some men explicitly forbid their wives from working, fearing that employment under male supervision might lead to infidelity. This belief restricts women's economic opportunities and perpetuates the notion

that working outside the home may cause neglect of family duties. This restriction creates a cycle of economic dependency, confining women to domestic roles and subjecting them to criticism if they fail to meet traditional standards of motherhood and domestic care. The cultural framework thus unfairly labels women as irresponsible if they cannot balance both economic and domestic responsibilities, despite the systemic barriers and lack of support they face.

The meme taps into these longstanding stereotypes, portraying the woman as irresponsible and prone to infidelity, while the man is framed as a diligent provider. The depiction of the woman's infidelity while the man is at work reflects societal fears and biases about women's reliability and fidelity. By implying that the woman's actions are trivial (So what!, It just happened) and not significant (It's no big deal), the text plays into cognitive models where women are treated as less responsible and more likely to betray their partners. The visual elements of the meme—dummy figures with distinct body language—further emphasize feelings of disconnection and neglect. The body language of these figures suggests unresolved tension and a sense of emotional detachment, mirroring the narrative's underlying critique of the woman's actions. The power imbalance is evident: the man's role as a provider is highlighted and valued, while the woman's role is scrutinized and judged

The reference to the child, "Sarah," and the insinuation of a paternity issue introduce a dynamic of power and control over the narrative. This reflects societal anxieties about paternity fraud, where women's actions are closely monitored and their reliability questioned. The language used in the caption shifts the blame for the relationship's issues onto the woman overlooking the duties of the man, further contributing to a culture of victim-blaming and reinforcing existing power dynamics. By framing women's actions in this manner, the meme not only critiques traditional gender roles but also supports a broader narrative that justifies controlling women's behavior and limiting their autonomy. This construction contributes to a societal framework that scrutinizes and judges women more harshly than men, particularly in contexts of paternity and infidelity.

#### 5.4. Construction of Women as Perpetrators of Infidelity

The analysis of the memes reveals a recurring narrative that portrays women as the primary instigators or enablers of infidelity. This portrayal is rooted in patriarchal stereotypes that blame women for relationship issues and frame them as morally irresponsible or deceitful. The following analysis illustrates how these stereotypes are perpetuated.



Figure 6

In Figure 6, the meme presents a comparison between women's dating preferences and a man's situation, featuring an image of a man in a suit, holding a cup of tea with a smug expression. The caption, "Women won't date a man living with his mother but they will date a man living with his wife," implies a perceived hypocrisy or inconsistency in women's dating choices. This metaphoric juxtaposition of men living with their mother and those living with their wife implies that women are not only tolerant of infidelity but may actively engage with men who are already married, suggesting that men in committed relationships are more attractive or acceptable. By framing "living with his wife" as a marker of desirability, the meme subtly reinforces the stereotype that

women are drawn to men with social or economic advantages, even at the expense of moral integrity. The meme employs generalization “women” to paints all women with a broad brush, ignoring the diversity of individual experiences and choices.

Contextualized in a patriarch society, the meme fails to account for the fact that men, including married men, often pursue women persistently and intrusively, using aggressive tactics to wear down their resistance. Many men adhere to the belief that “women only give in to a persistent man,” which drives them to relentlessly pressure women, disregarding their autonomy and boundaries. Despite this aggressive pursuit, when a woman eventually succumbs, she is blamed for the situation. When women become pregnant as a result of these relationships, they are labeled as “baby mamas” or “gold diggers.” This subtly shifts the focus away from the moral failings of the men and places the blame squarely on the women, overlooking the role of persistent married men in the scenario. Figure 2 contributes to the Nigeria societal bias that imposes stricter standards on women than on men. It perpetuates the notion that women are to blame for the infidelity of their male partners, thus reinforcing gender inequalities. By simplifying complex social dynamics into a polarized and easily digestible message, the meme supports and perpetuates negative stereotypes about women’s roles in relationships and their involvement in paternity fraud. This narrative highlights the unfairness in how society addresses and judges male and female behaviors differently.



Figure 7

The meme in Figure 7 uses a cartoon to illustrate a scenario where a woman, a child, and several men react to the idea of a DNA test. The image features a child asking, “DADDYS, ARE YOU SCARED?” while three men in traditional Yoruba, Igbo, and English attire display shocked expressions. This setup suggests that the woman might have been involved with multiple men from different backgrounds, implying promiscuity. The “DNA TEST” sign emphasizes doubts about paternity and the woman’s fidelity, while the child’s confident question, using the plural “DADDYS,” not only casts doubt on paternity but also implies that the woman has been unfaithful with multiple partners. This aligns with cultural norms that place the burden of clarifying paternity and fidelity on women, regardless of the situation. Traditional Nigerian beliefs often unfairly blame the woman for various societal and familial issues. Infertility, for instance, is typically attributed to the woman, even when the underlying problem lies with the man. This unfair attribution of fault places an undue burden on women, disregarding the possibility that men might also contribute to reproductive challenges. Women are expected to remain sexually loyal, even if their partners are absent for extended periods for whatever reasons. In cases where husbands cannot satisfy their wives sexually, the expectation of female loyalty remains unchanged. Women are bound by tradition and religion to remain faithful while also being discouraged from exploring their own sexual desires. If a woman seeks sexual relief outside the marriage, she faces harsh judgment, whereas men’s infidelities are often excused or rationalized with outdated beliefs like “a man doesn’t belong to one woman.” Similarly, when children exhibit problematic behavior, the woman is commonly held responsible. The absence of the father in child-rearing is frequently justified by his role as the primary provider, leaving the woman to bear the brunt of parental responsibilities. Even when women are engaged in professional pursuits, societal expectations still place the blame for any shortcomings in their children’s behavior on them.

In the meme, the men’s reactions are portrayed as central and dominant, reflecting a societal power structure where men’s doubts and fears about paternity are prioritized. The men’s shock

serves as a focal point, overshadowing the woman's own experience and emotional state. This imbalance illustrates how societal narratives often amplify male concerns and diminish female voices. The woman's anxious demeanor, coupled with her separation from the men, suggests a positioning where women are isolated and blamed for issues of fidelity. This reinforces the power dynamic where women are held responsible for maintaining moral integrity, while men's reactions dictate the discourse around paternity and fidelity.

The memes contribute to a culture that unfairly holds women responsible for infidelity, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and victim-blaming. By portraying women as the primary culprits in relationship issues, these memes undermine women's agency and reinforce a biased narrative that excuses men's infidelity while stigmatizing women, thus maintaining unfair and discriminatory standards in matters of fidelity and paternity.

### 5.5. Construction of Women as Unreliable and Untrustworthy

The portrayal of women as unreliable and untrustworthy is a deeply entrenched stereotype that pervades various forms of media, including contemporary online discourse. This stereotype is not only pervasive but also reinforced through a combination of visual imagery, textual content, and contextual implications, all of which work together to perpetuate negative perceptions of women's integrity. In this context, figure 8 and 9 illustrate how the stereotype of women as deceitful and untrustworthy is propagated.



Figure 8

In Figure 8, the meme features a high-contrast image of a shadowed woman with an eerie grin. This visual distortion, where her features are obscured against a lighter background, metaphorically represents hidden deceit. Although the meme lacks explicit text, its composition conveys a message of deceitfulness through unsettling imagery. The dark silhouette and eerie grin are not just stylistic choices but serve to construct a cognitive model that associates women with deceitfulness and suspicion. This visual representation aligns with traditional narratives that cast women in a negative light, tapping into societal fears and biases about women's motives. An expert in the field of health commented on DNA testing, noting that many men claim they prefer married women because they are less likely to be troublesome during pregnancy compared to single women. The expert further explained that if a married woman has an extramarital affair during her conception period, becomes pregnant, and then presents the child as her husband's, the husband—who may have also been intimate with his wife around the same time—might mistakenly believe the child is his and raise it as his own (Vanguard News, March 30, 2024). The visual representation in Figure 8 aligns with these traditional views, reinforcing a negative stereotype by emphasizing the woman's obscured and sinister appearance.

This visual representation taps into societal fears and biases about women's intentions, drawing on a historical context where women's actions and motives were often scrutinized and

mistrusted. Traditional and historical depictions often frame women as secretive and deceitful. In many Nigerian cultures, women seeking sexual satisfaction outside an unfulfilling marriage are labeled as unfaithful and morally corrupt. For example, in Yoruba culture, a woman who keeps secret relationships is sometimes viewed as potentially dangerous, with a proverb suggesting she could harm her husband if she doesn't self-destruct first. This stereotype extends to the belief that women are inherently deceptive and capable of hiding secrets for extended periods. The visual and thematic elements of Figure 1 thus contribute to a pervasive stereotype that views women as inherently deceptive and untrustworthy. This stereotype is reinforced through the eerie and shadowed portrayal, aligning with historical and cultural biases that have long scrutinized women's actions and motives.

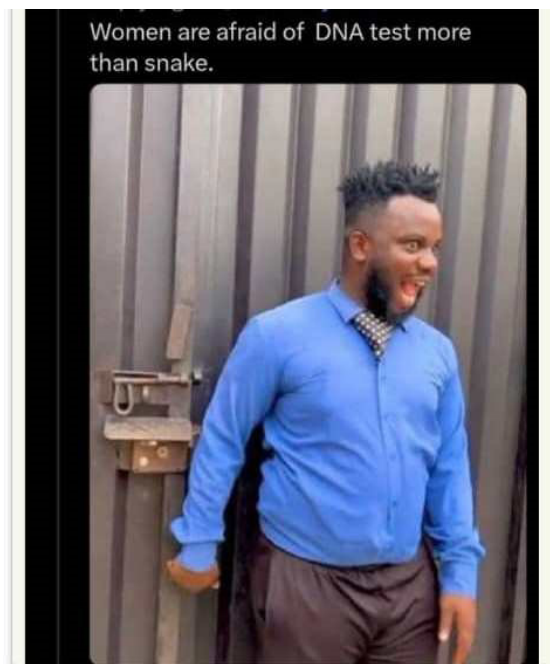


Figure 9

The meme features the popular comedian Sabinus in a humorous pose, using exaggerated expressions to create a light-hearted yet derogatory tone about women's fear of DNA tests. The caption, "Women are afraid of DNA tests more than snakes," trivializes women's concerns and suggests they are linked to dishonesty about paternity. The meme's producer acts on the social knowledge that DNA paternity tests are exposing numerous hidden family secrets, revealing a troubling trend of untrustworthiness. In an era where keeping such secrets has become increasingly difficult, a single DNA test can dramatically alter familial relationships, often uncovering previously concealed deceptions. This growing reliance on paternity testing underscores the pervasive issue of trust and the unsettling reality that many women, despite the expectations of fidelity, may have hidden truths about their children's paternity. The comparison of fear of DNA tests to fear of snakes in Figure 9 exaggerates and mocks women's legitimate worries about paternity disputes and reinforces the stereotype that they are deceitful. This approach is similar to how comedic portrayals in media, like in certain stand-up routines or TV shows, often exaggerate and belittle women's concerns for humor. The use of humor and a well-known comedian in the meme serves to downplay the serious implications of the stereotype it reinforces. The comedic framing effectively shifts focus from the genuine societal issue of paternity disputes to a simplistic and humorous portrayal of women's fears. This aligns with Van Dijk's (2006) concept of the ideological square, where negative traits about women are highlighted while similar traits in men are normalized or excused. By making light of women's fears and associating them with deceit, the meme perpetuates attitudes that undermine women's credibility and reinforce traditional gender stereotypes.

Through visual and textual elements, the memes (Figures 8 and 9) reveal a broader societal context in Nigeria where traditional beliefs and patriarchal attitudes reinforce the stereotype of women as

unreliable. These stereotypes affect women's roles in various spheres, including the workplace and family dynamics. In professional settings, women's contributions are often undervalued, and in family dynamics, men are presumed more competent in managing finances and making decisions, regardless of women's actual abilities. This marginalization extends to community settings, where women's participation is restricted by assumptions about their trustworthiness and competence. By perpetuating these stereotypes, the memes contribute to a culture of mistrust and suspicion towards women, undermining their credibility and reinforcing traditional gender roles.

## 6. Conclusion

This study investigates how Nigerian online forums depict gender stereotypes and misogyny through memes. Data were collected from Nairaland and Twitter over six months (January to June 2024), with a focus on semiotic analysis to uncover ideological messages. Using Kress's Multimodal Social Semiotics and Van Dijk's Social Cognitive Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis as the analytical framework, the analysis of the memes depicting women in various negative stereotypes—such as sexual objects, deceitful figures, and perpetrators of infidelity—reveals a deeply entrenched societal bias rooted in patriarchal norms. These memes not only reflect but also reinforce gender stereotypes that undermine women's integrity and autonomy. The portrayal of women as inherently deceitful, promiscuous and unfaithful perpetuates a culture of victim-blaming, where women are disproportionately held accountable for relationship issues and subjected to harsh social judgment in cases of paternity fraud. The memes utilize specific language and visual strategies to frame women in these ways. These strategies are deliberate and impactful, employing humor, visual metaphor, symbolism, generalization and culturally resonant themes to make their messages more persuasive and relatable.

In the context of Nigerian society, these stereotypes are exacerbated by traditional and religious beliefs that impose strict moral expectations on women while often excusing similar behaviors in men. The memes contribute to a societal narrative that devalues women's roles and contributions, framing them as objects of male desire or as morally questionable figures whose actions are suspect. This narrative not only limits women's opportunities and self-determination but also sustains a biased view that prioritizes male perspectives and interests.

By reinforcing these stereotypes, the memes play a significant role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards women, influencing how they are treated in various social, professional, and personal contexts. They normalize discriminatory practices and gender-based discrimination, perpetuating a framework where women's worth is constantly questioned and their autonomy undermined. This perpetuation of negative stereotypes hinders progress towards gender equality and mutual respect in relationships. To combat these harmful narratives, it is essential to challenge the stereotypes presented in media and popular culture, promote positive representations of women, and foster an environment that values women's contributions beyond traditional gender roles. Encouraging critical engagement with such content and raising awareness about the impact of these stereotypes can help dismantle the biases that underpin them, paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive society.

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