(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

Jigan Babaoja: Exploring humor and disability rhetoric in Nigeria's digital culture

Sunday ADEGBENRO *

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Abstract

This study examines the rhetoric of disability in Nigerian popular culture, with a specific focus on Abimbola Ibrahim, popularly known as Jigan Babaoja. Grounded in the field of critical disability rhetoric studies (Dolmage; Mitchell and Snyder; Garland-Thomson), the research explores how disability is humorously yet problematically portrayed through musical clips by prominent Nigerian artists such as Ahmed Ololade (Asake) and the late Ilerioluwa Oladimeji Aloba (Mohbad), alongside Instagram and Facebook reels. By analyzing these media forms, this paper highlights the underlying societal attitudes toward disability and the role of humor in perpetuating stereotypes. Utilizing qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis, the study reveals that the normalization of mocking disability in popular media reflects broader societal prejudices. This research contributes to the discourse on disability representation in African contexts (Adams; Mji et al.), advocating for more respectful and inclusive portrayals in media. The findings underscore the need for critical engagement with how humor is used in relation to disability, promoting a shift towards more positive and respectful representations in Nigerian popular culture. This research contributes to the discourse on disability representation, advocating for more respectful and inclusive portrayals in media.

Keywords: Disability Rhetoric; Jigan; Digital Culture; Nigeria

1. Introduction

Disability rhetoric studies have expanded our understanding of how disabilities are represented and perceived across various cultural contexts, revealing deep-seated societal attitudes and prejudices. In the context of Nigerian popular culture, these representations provide critical insights into how society views and treats individuals with disabilities. Kazeem Abimbola Ibrahim, known as Jigan Babaoja, is a significant figure in this discourse. As a prominent Nigerian actor, comedian, and musician, Jigan has not only made substantial contributions to the entertainment industry but also become a central figure in discussions about disability due to his physical condition. His popular slang "Sho mo age mi" ("Do you know my age?") has become a household phrase, further cementing his influence in Nigerian culture. This slang originated from a humorous encounter on set, reflecting the cultural importance placed on age and respect in Nigerian society, especially within the Yoruba community.

Despite the growing interest in disability rhetoric, there remains a significant gap in the research focusing on African contexts, particularly Nigeria. Previous studies, such as those by Mitchell and Snyder, Garland-Thomson, and Dolmage, have laid the groundwork for understanding disability representation in Western media. However, similar analyses in Nigerian media are limited. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on how Jigan Babaoja's disability is portrayed in Nigerian music and social media. Specifically, it will analyze the lyrics and visual content of songs by Asake and Mohbad, as well as Instagram and Facebook reels featuring Jigan and his colleagues. By examining these media forms, the research seeks to uncover the societal attitudes towards disability and the role of humor in these portrayals.

---

* Corresponding author: Sunday ADEGBENRO

The significance of this study lies in its potential to enhance our understanding of how disability is perceived and represented in Nigerian media. This analysis is particularly relevant in light of critical disability studies, which emphasize the importance of challenging negative stereotypes and advocating for more inclusive representations. By highlighting the use of humor in the portrayal of Jigan's disability, this study will shed light on the complex ways in which Nigerian popular culture engages with disability. It will also contribute to the broader discourse on disability representation in African contexts, offering recommendations for more respectful and inclusive media practices. This study underscores the need for critical engagement with the rhetoric of disability in Nigerian popular culture, promoting a shift towards more positive and respectful representations.

2. Literature Review

Disability representation in media is a crucial area of study within disability studies, focusing on how individuals with disabilities are portrayed and the impact of these portrayals on societal attitudes. Theoretical perspectives such as the social model of disability, stigma theory, and humor studies provide valuable insights into these representations.

The social model of disability, as articulated by scholars like Tom Shakespeare, emphasizes that disability is not merely a medical condition but a social construct shaped by environmental barriers and societal attitudes (Shakespeare). This perspective shifts the focus from the individual's impairment to the societal structures that hinder their full participation.

Stigma theory, developed by Erving Goffman, explores how individuals with disabilities are often subjected to social stigma, resulting in their marginalization (Goffman). This theory is essential for understanding the negative stereotypes and prejudices that media representations can perpetuate. Scholars like Garland-Thomson have expanded on this, examining how cultural narratives contribute to the stigmatization of disabled individuals (Garland-Thomson).

Humor studies, particularly in the context of disability, analyze how humor can both challenge and reinforce stereotypes. Jay Dolmage's work on disability rhetoric highlights the complex role of humor in disability representation, noting that while humor can be a tool for empowerment, it often serves to marginalize and ridicule (Dolmage).

Research on the portrayal of disability in Nigerian media and music is limited but growing. Existing studies often focus on the lack of positive representation and the prevalence of negative stereotypes. For instance, Rachel Adams's research on African literatures and the politics of disability highlights how African media frequently depict disabled individuals as objects of pity or sources of inspiration, rather than as complex characters (Adams). Gubela Mji and colleagues' work on disability in South Africa provides a broader African context, discussing how Western and African discourses intersect in the representation of disability (Mji et al.).

In Nigerian media, the representation of disability often reflects broader societal attitudes. Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry has been criticized for its portrayal of disability, which frequently reinforces negative stereotypes. According to Sarah Abdullah, Nollywood films often depict disabled characters as either evil or as objects of pity, lacking agency and complexity (Abdullah). This portrayal contributes to the stigmatization and marginalization of disabled individuals in Nigerian society.

However, there is a notable gap in the research on the use of humor in representing disability within Nigerian music and social media. While scholars like Dolmage have examined humor in disability rhetoric broadly, there is a need for focused studies on how humor is used in Nigerian popular culture to depict disability. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the portrayal of Jigan Babaoja's disability in musical clips by Asake and Mohbad, and in social media content by Nigerian actors.

By addressing these gaps, this research will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of disability representation in Nigerian media. It will highlight the need for more positive and respectful portrayals, challenging existing stereotypes and promoting a more inclusive approach to disability in popular culture.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

The data for this study were carefully selected to provide a comprehensive analysis of how disability is represented in Nigerian popular culture, particularly focusing on Jigan Babaoja. The selection includes musical clips from prominent

Nigerian artists Asake and Mohbad, and Instagram posts by Jaiye Kuti and Jigan himself. These sources were chosen because they represent different media formats (music and social media) and collectively offer a broad perspective on the public portrayal and perception of Jigan's disability.

3.1.1. Musical Clips

- Asake's Song: The music video and lyrics of Asake's song, which features references to Jigan Babaoja's disability. This source was selected due to its popularity and the explicit mention of Jigan's physical condition.
  - Link: Asake Jigan
- Mohbad's Song: The music video and lyrics of Mohbad's song, which also includes references to Jigan's disability and mimics his walking style. This clip was chosen for its significant reach and impact on public perception.
  - Link: Mohbad: Ask About Me Mohbad Jigan Insta Reel

3.1.2. Social Media Content

- Jaiye Kuti's Instagram Reel: A video where Jaiye Kuti humorously imitates Jigan's walking style. This post was selected to analyze the humor used and its implications.
  - Link: Jaiye Kuti jokingly mocks Jigan
- Jigan's Instagram Post: A reel by Jigan himself, where he humorously challenges Mohbad for making fun of his condition, providing insight into Jigan's own perspective on these portrayals.
  - Link: MohBad: Jigan Facebook Reel

These data sources were chosen because they provide a rich context for examining the rhetorical and thematic elements of disability representation. They reflect both direct and indirect forms of communication about disability through music and social media, allowing for a multifaceted analysis.

3.2. Analytical Approach

The selected data were analyzed using a combination of qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis. These methods are justified as they allow for an in-depth examination of both the content and the context of the representations.

3.2.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

This method involves systematically coding and categorizing the content of the musical clips and social media posts to identify patterns and themes. The lyrics and visual elements of the music videos will be transcribed and analyzed to understand how Jigan's disability is referenced. This analysis will help in identifying recurrent motifs, language use, and the overall tone of the portrayals.

3.2.2. Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis will be used to examine the language and social practices within the musical clips and social media posts. This method will help in understanding how disability is constructed and communicated through these media. It will focus on the rhetorical strategies used by the artists and actors, the context of their messages, and the potential impact on audience perceptions.

3.2.3. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis will be applied to identify and analyze the key themes that emerge from the content. This includes themes related to humor, stigma, and societal attitudes towards disability. By categorizing the data into themes, this method allows for a structured understanding of the underlying messages and their implications.

3.2.4. Justification of Data and Analysis

The choice of data sources is justified by their popularity and influence in shaping public perceptions of disability in Nigeria. The selected musical clips and social media posts are representative of the broader trends in Nigerian popular culture, making them suitable for this analysis. The combination of qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis provides a robust framework for examining the complex and nuanced ways in which disability is represented. These methods collectively enable a comprehensive understanding of both the explicit content and the broader societal implications of these portrayals. By employing these analytical approaches, the study aims to uncover the rhetorical strategies used in the representation of Jigan Babaoja's disability and to contribute to the discourse on disability representation in Nigerian popular culture.

3.3. Representation in Music

Asake's Song

Link: Asake Jigan

3.3.1. Transcription and Analysis

Asake's song contains the lyrics, "Jigan Jigan ese mi o de le," which loosely translates to "my leg can't touch the ground." This lyric is a direct reference to Jigan Babaoja's disability, specifically his difficulty in walking due to his physical condition. The phrase "ese mi o dele" highlights Jigan's struggle to maintain balance and walk normally, which Asake uses as a central theme in his song.

This portrayal, while intended to be humorous, reflects a broader societal tendency to mock physical impairments. In Nigerian culture, humor is often used as a way to address uncomfortable or taboo subjects, but it can also perpetuate negative stereotypes and stigmatize individuals with disabilities. By referencing Jigan's disability in this manner, Asake's song underscores the normalization of mocking physical impairments in popular media, which can contribute to the marginalization and stigmatization of disabled individuals.

This analysis aligns with Jay Dolmage's perspective on disability rhetoric, where humor can both empower and marginalize. While the humorous reference might be seen as a form of endearment or camaraderie within certain contexts, it also risks reinforcing societal prejudices and overlooking the lived experiences of disabled individuals (Dolmage).

Mohbad's Song

Link: Mohbad Jigan Insta Reel

3.3.2. Transcription and Analysis

In Mohbad's song, the lyrics "I removed one of his legs; Tamurege bi Jigan" are particularly striking. This line translates to "I removed one of his legs; stumble like Jigan," and is accompanied by a mimicry of Jigan's distinctive walk. This portrayal not only highlights Jigan's physical condition but also uses it as a focal point for humor.

This kind of representation has significant societal implications. By mimicking Jigan's walk and explicitly referencing his disability, Mohbad's song reinforces the notion that physical impairments are a source of amusement. This can contribute to the dehumanization of individuals with disabilities, reducing their identities to their physical limitations. Moreover, such portrayals can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, suggesting that disabled individuals are inherently inferior or laughable.

Erving Goffman's stigma theory provides a useful framework for understanding the impact of these representations. Goffman posits that individuals with visible disabilities are often stigmatized and subjected to social exclusion (Goffman). Mohbad's song, by highlighting and mocking Jigan's disability, perpetuates this stigma and reinforces negative societal attitudes.

In the broader context of disability studies, scholars like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson emphasize the importance of moving beyond simplistic and negative portrayals of disability. Garland-Thomson argues for a more nuanced and respectful representation that acknowledges the complexity and humanity of disabled individuals (Garland-Thomson). Mohbad's song, however, falls short of this standard, instead opting for humor at the expense of a marginalized group.

Both Asake's and Mohbad's songs highlight a critical issue in the representation of disability in Nigerian popular culture. While humor is a pervasive and powerful cultural tool, its use in these songs underscores the need for more thoughtful and respectful portrayals of disability. By examining these musical representations, this study reveals the broader societal attitudes towards disability and calls for a shift towards more inclusive media practices.

3.4. Representation in Social Media

Jaiye Kuti's Instagram Reel

Link: Jaiye Kuti Mocks Jigan

3.4.1. Description and Analysis

In this Instagram reel, actress Jaiye Kuti humorously imitates Jigan Babaoja's staggered walk, which is a result of his disability. The video depicts Jaiye mimicking Jigan's movement, with Jigan himself participating and laughing along. This portrayal is intended to be light-hearted and humorous, presenting a moment of camaraderie between colleagues.

However, analyzing the humor in this context reveals deeper implications for public perceptions of disability. The humor used in the reel reinforces the notion that physical impairments are a source of amusement. While Jigan's participation might suggest a level of acceptance or self-deprecation, it also raises questions about the societal norms that allow such portrayals to be considered acceptable or funny.

Jay Dolmage's work on disability rhetoric highlights how humor can both challenge and reinforce societal prejudices. In this instance, while the humor may seem benign and even endearing, it perpetuates a view of disability as something that can be mocked. This aligns with Erving Goffman's concept of stigma, where public perceptions and reactions contribute to the marginalization of disabled individuals (Goffman). Furthermore, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theory on extraordinary bodies suggests that such representations can reinforce stereotypes and limit the social roles available to disabled individuals (Garland-Thomson).

Jigan's Response to Mohbad

Link: Jaiye Kuti jokingly mocks Jigan

3.4.2. Description and Analysis

In this Instagram reel, Jigan Babaoja humorously confronts Mohbad for making fun of his disability in a song. The interaction begins with Jigan challenging Mohbad, who denies any ill intent. The exchange escalates humorously, with Jigan threatening legal action, only for Mohbad to offer a monetary settlement. The reel concludes with both artists laughing and settling their mock dispute, emphasizing their friendship and mutual respect.

This interaction provides a complex view of humor and disability. On the one hand, Jigan's humorous confrontation and the subsequent resolution illustrate a form of empowerment, where he uses humor to assert control over the narrative surrounding his disability. On the other hand, it underscores the delicate balance between humor and offense. The negotiation of personal boundaries is evident as Jigan navigates the line between accepting humor directed at his disability and addressing the potential for offense.

This scenario aligns with Dolmage's perspective on the rhetorical power of disability, where humor can serve as a tool for both empowerment and marginalization (Dolmage). Jigan's ability to use humor to negotiate his portrayal reflects a form of agency, yet it also highlights the pervasive societal tendency to use disability as a comedic device. The mock settlement and friendly resolution suggest a normalization of making light of disability, which can undermine efforts to promote more respectful and inclusive representations.

The analysis of these social media representations reveals a complex interplay of humor, empowerment, and marginalization. While humor can foster camaraderie and offer a means for disabled individuals to navigate social interactions, it also risks reinforcing negative stereotypes and societal prejudices. These findings underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of how disability is portrayed in popular culture and the impact of these portrayals on public attitudes.

4. Discussion

4.1. Sociocultural Implications

The representations of disability in Nigerian popular culture, as illustrated through the case of Jigan Babaoja, offer a window into broader societal attitudes towards disability. Nigerian culture, heavily influenced by traditional and communal values, often places a strong emphasis on physical ability and health. This cultural norm is reflected in the ways disabilities are portrayed in media and entertainment.

Humor plays a significant role in Nigerian society, serving as both a social lubricant and a tool for societal critique. In the context of disability, humor can be double-edged. On one hand, it can foster inclusion and camaraderie, as seen in the playful interactions between Jigan and his colleagues. On the other hand, it can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and

reinforce societal prejudices. The humor directed at Jigan's disability often relies on physical comedy and mimicry, which can trivialize the lived experiences of disabled individuals and reduce their identities to sources of amusement.

Jay Dolmage's concept of "disability rhetoric" helps to understand this dynamic. Dolmage argues that disability is often used rhetorically to symbolize weakness or failure, but it can also be reappropriated by disabled individuals to assert their agency and challenge societal norms (Dolmage). In Nigerian popular culture, the humor surrounding Jigan's disability reflects a tension between these two uses. While Jigan's participation in the humor about his disability can be seen as an assertion of agency, it also underscores the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theory of "extraordinary bodies" further explains how cultural narratives shape the perception of disability. According to Garland-Thomson, cultural representations often define the boundaries of normalcy and deviance, thereby influencing societal attitudes towards disabled individuals (Garland-Thomson). In Nigeria, where traditional values emphasize physical prowess and communal harmony, representations of disability that focus on physical limitations can reinforce the view of disabled individuals as deviants or burdens.

4.2. Impact on Disability Discourse

Popular culture plays a crucial role in shaping and reflecting public discourse around disability. The portrayal of Jigan Babaoja in music and social media significantly influences how disability is perceived in Nigerian society. These representations contribute to the broader discourse by either challenging or reinforcing existing stereotypes.

The music videos by Asake and Mohbad, as well as the social media interactions involving Jigan, highlight the normalization of humor at the expense of disabled individuals. Such portrayals can have several consequences. Firstly, they reinforce the stigma associated with disability. Erving Goffman's stigma theory posits that societal reactions to visible disabilities often result in the marginalization and social exclusion of disabled individuals (Goffman). By presenting disability as a subject of humor, these media portrayals can perpetuate stigma and hinder the social integration of disabled individuals.

Secondly, these representations can influence the self-perception of disabled individuals. Constant exposure to media that mocks or trivializes disability can affect how disabled people see themselves and their place in society. It can lead to internalized stigma, where individuals begin to accept and embody the negative stereotypes portrayed in media.

However, there is also the potential for positive change. By engaging with these portrayals critically, there is an opportunity to shift the discourse towards more inclusive and respectful representations. Scholars like Rachel Adams and Gubela Mji advocate for a more nuanced and positive portrayal of disability in African media (Adams; Mji et al.). This involves not only highlighting the challenges faced by disabled individuals but also celebrating their achievements and contributions to society.

In conclusion, the representations of disability in Nigerian popular culture, exemplified by the case of Jigan Babaoja, reflect and shape societal attitudes towards disability. While humor can serve as a tool for inclusion and empowerment, it can also perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reinforce stigma. By critically engaging with these portrayals, there is potential to foster a more inclusive and respectful discourse around disability in Nigeria.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that the representation of disability in Nigerian popular culture, exemplified by the case of Jigan Babaoja, reflects broader societal attitudes that often oscillate between humor and marginalization. While humor can serve as a tool for inclusion and empowerment, it also perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces stigma. The analysis of musical clips by Asake and Mohbad, and social media interactions involving Jigan, highlights the normalization of using disability as a comedic device, which has significant implications for public perceptions and the self-identity of disabled individuals.

5.1. Implications for Future Research

Future research should explore the impact of these representations on a wider audience, particularly focusing on the long-term effects on societal attitudes towards disability. Additionally, comparative studies involving other African countries can provide a broader understanding of how cultural contexts influence disability representation. Further research should also investigate the potential of digital humanities tools in analyzing and transforming the discourse around disability in media.

Recommendations

To promote more respectful and nuanced representations of disability in media and entertainment, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Engage Disabled Voices: Involve disabled individuals in the creation and production of media content to ensure authentic and respectful portrayals.
- Educate Content Creators: Provide training for media professionals on the impact of disability representations and the importance of avoiding harmful stereotypes.
- Promote Positive Narratives: Highlight stories that celebrate the achievements and contributions of disabled individuals, moving beyond their physical impairments.
- Foster Inclusive Humor: Encourage humor that is inclusive and empowering, rather than mocking or marginalizing disabled individuals.

By adopting these recommendations, Nigerian media can contribute to a more inclusive and respectful discourse around disability, challenging societal prejudices and promoting social integration

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

References

[1]   Abdullah S. Nollywood and the representation of disability. Journal of African Media Studies. 2017;9(2):175-90.

[2]   Adams R. African literatures and the politics of disability. Research in African Literatures. 2011;42(3):1-15.

[3]   Cynthia L-W, James WC. A personal, professional, and bibliographic essay on living in a disabled family. Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies. 2022. doi: 10.3828/jlcds.2022.23

[4]   Dale J, Jay D. Accessible articulations: comics and disability rhetorics in Hawkeye #19. 2017. doi: 10.1353/INK.2018.0024

[5]   Dolmage JT. Disability Rhetoric. Syracuse University Press; 2014.

[6]   Emiola N. Disability discourse in the curriculum of Nigerian theological institutions: constraints, possibilities and recommendations. Journal of Disability and Religion. 2016. doi: 10.1080/23312521.2016.1164652

[7]   Garland-Thomson R. Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature. Columbia University Press; 1997.

[8]   Goffman E. Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. Simon & Schuster; 1963.

[9]   Jennifer LE. Ableist rhetoric: how we know, value, and see disability: by Jim Cherney, University Park, PA, Penn State UP, 2019, 200 pp., $29.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-271-08469-5. Rhetoric Society Quarterly. 2020. doi: 10.1080/02773945.2020.1851119

[10]   Jennifer RE. Difficult articulacy: rhetoric, disability and early modern styling of body-mind. Paragraph. 2024. doi: 10.3366/para.2024.0453

[11]   Kolawole O. Commodifying the "sacred," beatifying the "abnormal": Nollywood and the representation of disability. The Global South. 2012. doi: 10.2979/GLOBALSOUTH.7.1.137

[12]   Mji G, et al. Exploring the perception of disability in South Africa: a dialogue between African and Western discourses. Disability and Rehabilitation. 2009;31(1):35-41.

[13]   Olusola JO. Framing disability: a content analysis of newspapers in Nigeria. 2012.

[14]   Ojebiyi OA, Akanbi GO, Lawal OB. Perception and attitudes towards disability education in Nigeria: a historico-cultural perspective. 2016.

[15]   Review: Rhetorics of overcoming: rewriting narratives of disability and accessibility in writing studies. Teaching English in the Two-Year College. 2022. doi: 10.58680/tetyc202232197

[16]   Shakespeare T. Disability Rights and Wrongs. Routledge; 2006.

[17]   Vidali A. The biggest little ways toward access: thinking with disability in site-specific rhetorical work. 2022. doi: 10.4324/9781003258964-7