

User-Generated Stickers: Social Media for Language Revitalization and Maintenance in Africa

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Abstract

Studies in computer-mediated communication have shown how its different innovations have aided languages to find space which may assist in their revitalization. The use of user-generated stickers is one of such innovations, and it has just emerged on social media as a virtual space. Therefore, this paper examines user-generated stickers with a view to revealing how they revitalize African languages by giving opportunities to African users to express a variety of ideas in any of the continents' indigenous languages. Generally, a sticker is a blend of sized picture and text. The paper however finds that company-generated stickers, which are also found on social media, are rigid, defined and do not allow individual creativity and cultural inclusion. User-generated stickers, on the other hand, are not rigid, as a picture could be accompanied by a text in any language or by any other feature from any culture. This paper therefore sees user-generated stickers as constituting a tool with the flexibility of which could be leveraged on for language revitalization, maintenance as well as cultural preservation in the present-day Africa. It also investigates the degree of usage and the attitude of users to this tool. The analyses are couched on the tenets of Meme theory. WhatsApp chats, observations and direct interviews were used as data sources. The analyses reveal that although user-generated stickers encounter both positive and negative predispositions from users, they considerably influence the revitalization of African languages.

Keywords: *Computer-Mediated Communication, Social media, User-generated stickers, Company-generated stickers, Language revitalization*

Introduction

The African continent has 1,340,598,147 people living in it (World population review of 2020) and this constitutes about 17.87% of the world's population. There exist over 2000 languages and 1000 dialects in Africa. Some of these languages by virtue of their number of speakers are major languages in their countries while some are minority languages. The minority languages are being dominated by the major languages. In the same vein, some of these major languages are being threatened by the foreign languages made contact with as a result of colonization.

Similarly, Nigeria, one of the countries in Africa is faced with a multilingual complexity. According to Ethnologue (2020), there are over 520 languages in Nigeria and 27 are close to extinction e.g. Akum, Bade, Defaka, Dubuza etc. As known, the three major languages in Nigeria are Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. Even though they are not categorically endangered, they

are still faced with challenge of dominance by the status of English Language in Nigeria. So, efforts to revitalize these minority languages and maintain the usage of these major languages are still very much necessary. Since these major languages have gained ground in literature, the conventional “documentation’ means of revitalization might have to be complemented with other possible means geared towards language maintenance. In this light, this paper sees the social media viz-a-viz User-generated stickers as an instrument of revitalization and maintenance of languages using the three major languages as languages of reference.

The Social Media

Social media, as the name implies, is a medium for virtual social interactions. By extension, it comprises different platforms where people interact, share ideas, market business, etc. These platforms include Facebook, MySpace, 2go, WhatsApp, Yahoo Messenger, Gmail, Twitter, Instagram, etc. Due to its ability to make communication easier between individuals that are million miles apart, social media has gained so much global popularity.

Social Media Usage in Nigeria

According to Hootsuitsocial media marketing platform, the global state of digital in 2019 report disclosed that there are 98.39 million internet users in Nigeria. With this statistics, compared to January 2018, there is a 4 million increase in the number of internet users. Despite this increase, overall internet penetration remains quite low with only 50% of the population connected to the internet, compared to the global average of 57%. Out of the 98.39 million Nigerian internet users, 54% access the internet daily while only 12% (24 million) have active social media account. The report finds that 3 hours 17 minutes is the average amount of time Nigerians spend on social media. This is higher than the global average which is 3 hours 14 minutes.

Of the 98.39 million internet users in Nigeria, below are some social media platforms and percentage of their users.

WhatsApp	85% of users
Facebook	78% of users
Insagram	57% of users
Fb messenger	54% of users
Youtube	53% of users

From the above, it is evident that WhatsApp has the highest percentage of users and therefore the most active platform in Nigeria. Thus, it is the platform of investigation in this paper.

Social Media and Communication

Before the advent of digital communication, postal services were primarily the means of communication between people of different geographical locations. These traditional means of communication were void of promptness and speed. That is, the participants had to wait

for days or even months to have the messages delivered and even get response. This made it ineffective for emergency and timeliness purpose in cases such as deadline involvement. The emergence of social media has been able to bridge the gap of speed, prompt and immediate message delivery and reception.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is an umbrella term which refers to human communication via computer (Simpson, 2000). Space, as a sociolinguistic term, refers to the context of language use. In the light of this, social media can be regarded as a virtual space, that is, a place where language is used since communication which can only be achieved through language use remains the ultimate purpose of social media interactions. The rapid development of Information communication and technology (ICT) in recent years is associated with the corresponding growth in interest in CMC. Initially, CMC was mainly text based and as such, communication on all the social media was solely through texts. However, over time, innovations set in to make the virtual space more realistic.

Distinctions can be made between Synchronous CMC; where interactions take place in real time and Asynchronous CMC where participants are not necessarily online simultaneously. Synchronous CMC includes various types of text-based real-time online chats, computer, audio, and video conferences. Asynchronous CMC encompasses email, discussion forum and mailing list.

WhatsApp

WhatsApp, the focus of this paper can be categorized under the synchronous and asynchronous CMC. Synchronous because its audio and video conferencing features can only be utilized if participants are online simultaneously while its text-based feature makes it asynchronous because the receiver does not necessarily have to be online at the point the sender drops the message since messages can be replied at will. As established in Section 2.1, WhatsApp is the most active and used social media platform by Nigerians.

Overview of WhatsApp Features

The introduction of WhatsApp as a social media platform was characterized by text and very few smileys (for the purpose of facial expression). The application gets updated at intervals and each update comes with an improvement on the features. Consequently, updates came with increased number of smileys, voice call, video call, gifs, company provided stickers and very recently, user-generated stickers.

Stickers

A sticker is a blend of sized picture and/or a text conveying a particular message. Below are samples of stickers with pictures only, text only and a unity of text and picture.



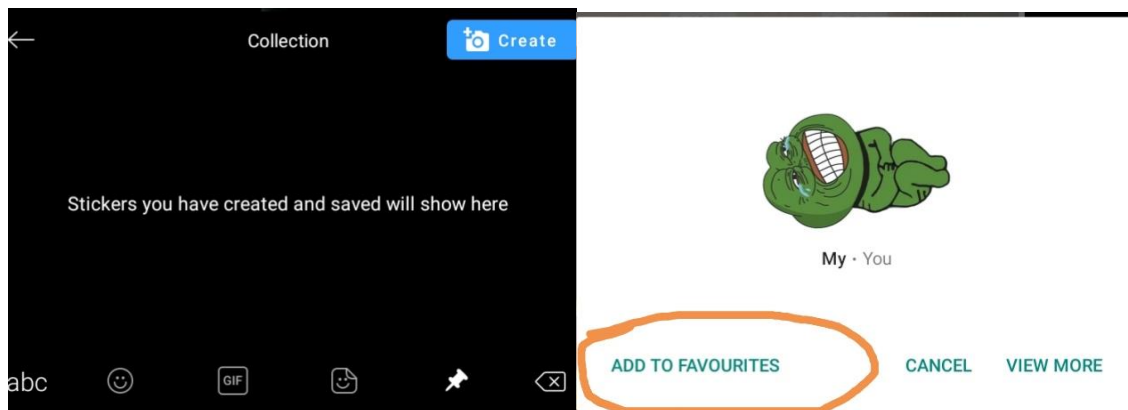
Generally, stickers are used to add a touch of reality to WhatsApp chats. It was added to WhatsApp towards the end of 2017. It projects different facial expressions that a user can have while chatting. Therefore, it exposes hidden gesture/non-verbal cues behind ordinary text chats. These gestures or non-verbal cues are expected during face-to-face conversations, so stickers are designed to make virtual interactions feel like face-to-face interactions by verbalizing non-verbal cues.

The inclusion of the stickers features into the WhatsApp platform started with company-generated stickers which are designed and provided by WhatsApp Incorporation. They are limited, rigid and default in nature as they cannot be edited or replicated to suit user’s purpose at a given point. Below are samples of company-provided stickers:

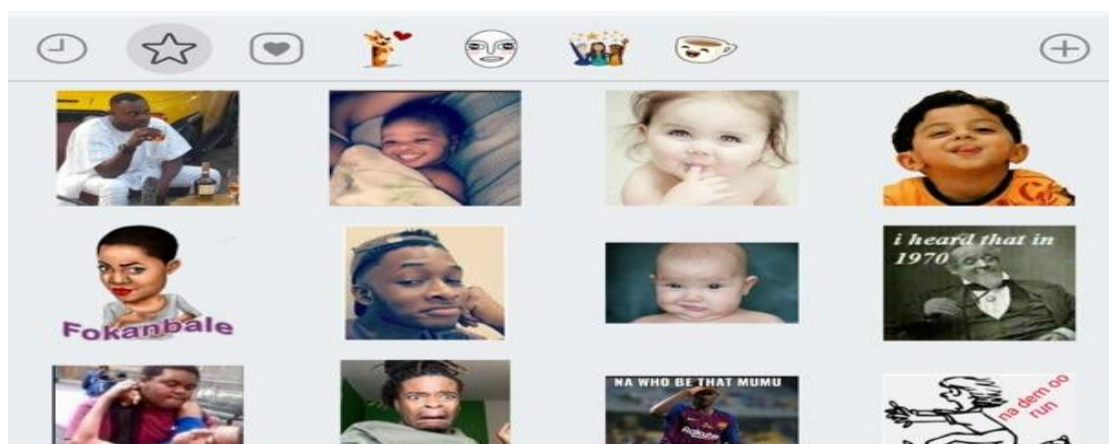
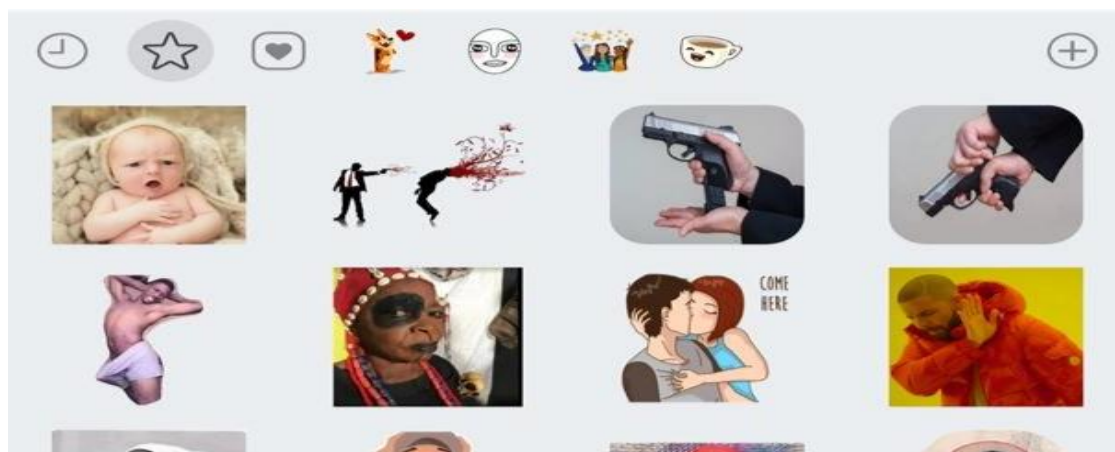


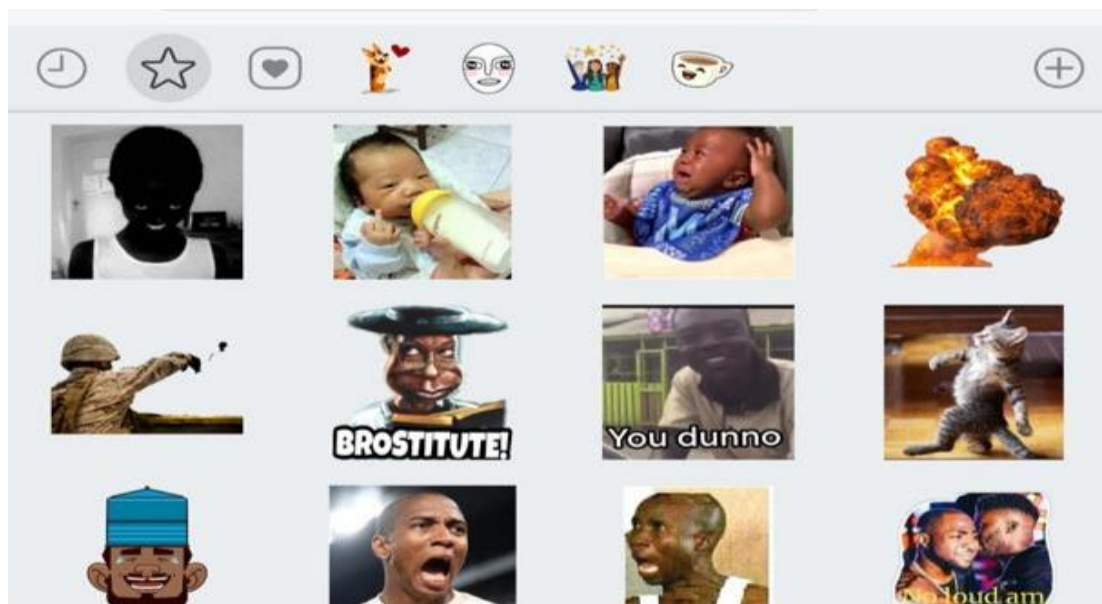
In a bid to promote flexibility, the sticker feature was updated such that users are able to create their own stickers to suit their present communication need. A “create” icon was introduced such that when on the WhatsApp interface, a click on it gives users the avenue to convert any picture in the phone’s gallery into a sticker. Interestingly, texts can be inscribed on the

converted picture. Also, users can easily save a received sticker to their collection of stickers by simply tapping an “Add to favourite” icon. The “create” and “add to favourite” icons are highlighted in the pictures below;



Subsequently, the stickers in the collection are at users’ discretion at any point in time during chats to serve a communication purpose. Below is an example of what a collection of stickers looks like;





The text inscribed on a gestural picture is not arbitrary as it must interpret what is encoded in the gesture. The cultural benefit of this update is that the texts and picture are absolutely at the user's discretion. This means that the picture can depict any culture, likewise, the text can be in any language of the user's choice. There is synchronization between culture and language. It is against this backdrop that this paper builds.

Language, Culture and Social Media

Language is the driving tool of social media, and since language and culture are inseparable, there is interplay between language, culture and social media. The global acceptance and wide use of social media among Nigerians make it a veritable tool for language revitalization if harnessed. This acceptability and use of social media in Nigeria is not limited to youths only. It also encompasses adolescents, young adults, adults and even children. Therefore, language revitalization goal will be very effective.

Language Revitalization and Maintenance

According to Benrabah (2004), language maintenance is the continuous use of the mother tongue, regardless of the cultural pressures from a more prestigious or politically more dominant language. The social media as a virtual space hosts a lot of languages - ranging from foreign languages to indigenous languages –and the usage of these major languages over foreign languages gear towards their maintenance.

Abdulmohsin (2016) opines that language is the most important observable aspect of culture. He further maintains that it plays a pivotal role not only to communicate values, customs and beliefs, but also to form identities. Therefore, it can be said that language loss is cultural heritage loss.

The struggle to prevent language loss or cultural heritage loss birthed language revitalization. Language revitalization is a fairly recent subfield of linguistics that is concerned with halting and reversing the extinction of languages (Wilhelm, 2013). It is a conscious effort made by linguists and language users. Besides prevention of language loss, there are other various reasons for language revitalization. One of such reasons is to preserve the richness of having many differences in a multilingual society. In the same vein, in a once-colonized country like Nigeria, where even after independence, the language of the colonizers is still in dominant use, it enhances the restoration and continuous use of the indigenous languages of the country. More so, restoring the indigenous languages can empower and strengthen the cultural/ethnic group associated with the language.

Crystal (2000) identifies six factors which help endangered languages to progress. The language will progress if the speakers of the language:

- Increase their prestige within the dominant community.
- Increase their wealth
- Increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community
- Have a strong presence in the educational system
- Can write down the language
- Can make use of electronic technology.

Expanding on factors IV, V and VI above, it can be argued that Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa which are the selected languages for this paper have a relatively strong presence in the education system of Nigeria. Also, the languages have orthography and thus, factor “VI” can be adequately achieved. It is in this light that this paper based its proposition that the creation of user-generated stickers is a means to harness electronic technology for language revitalization.

Methodology

WhatsApp chats, observations and direct interviews were used as data sources. The observation was carried out in created WhatsApp groups whereby the usage of stickers was observed. Furthermore, questions on attitudes towards the concept of user-generated sticker were asked from selected people. The analyses were couched on the tenets of Meme theory.

Theoretical Framework

Meme theory has been subjected to different views and perspectives. The first definition of meme was proposed by Richard Dawkins in 1976. He defined memes based on the notion of replicator. A replicator is a biological or chemical singularity of indivisible proportions. This “molecule” acts as a template and has the capacity of creating copies of itself (Dawkins, 1976, p.15).

Another perspective different from the one above is conceptualizing memes based on communication theory. Blackmoore (1999) explains that this is possible if a meme is created in order to spread in the media, or as Dawkins (1989) also later posits; whether they act as a piece of information that is transmitted. This perspective will be suitable for this paper

because sticker is not only a replication or imitation of possible human facial expressions and gestures but also created to be spread in the media. It further acts a piece of information that is transmitted.

More so, under this perspective, a meme is a unity of information which can be a representation, a pattern, a rule or an imitational icon. Basically, , a content and a structure that replicates by passing on via communication between one to one, one to many or many to many. It requires a medium (channel) and an agent to be transmitted. User-generated stickers satisfy this definition because it is a unity of information (picture and text) that requires a medium (WhatsApp platform) and agent (users) to be transmitted. It can also be transmitted via individual chats and group chats.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section will have display of different stickers and also discuss the results of the interview and observations. The stickers will be grouped based on the expressions they project.

(1) Expression of surprise or shock

(2)



(2) Expression of boredom/tiredness/sleepiness



(3) Expression of Mockery



(4) Expression of laughter/happiness



(5) Expression of anger/fury



And many others that express confusion, sadness etc.



Cultural Stickers

These are stickers with pictures and texts that depict the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa culture. They represent how user-generated sticker can be used to promote indigenous language use and culture representation.

Igbo



Hausa



Yoruba



As seen, some of the stickers have pictures of people dressed in indigenous attires and the texts are in the corresponding languages. These cultural stickers are numerous, the above are just the few selected for this paper. It is to be noted that these stickers can portray any culture and language, it is not limited to Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo (the selected languages for this paper).

Findings from Interview

Online interview was carried out involving 20 participants; 10 males and 10 females. The following are the questions asked:

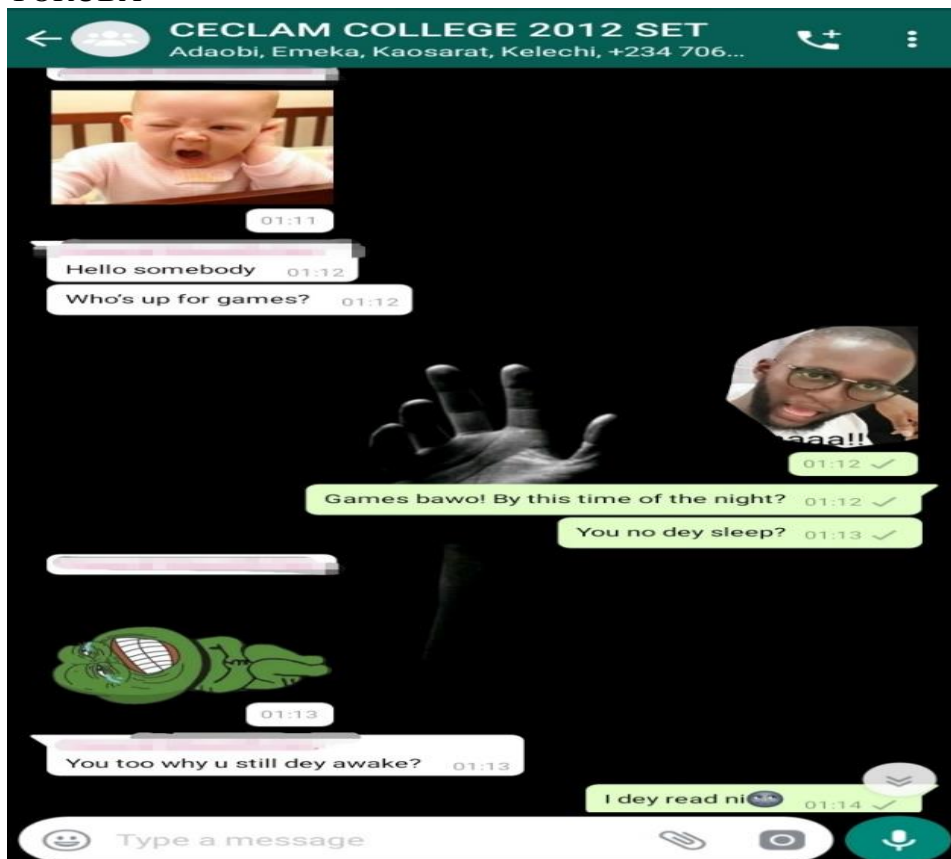
1. What do you think about the new generation of stickers, I mean the fact that anybody can create stickers?
2. Do you even like stickers?
3. Do you enjoy chatting with stickers?
4. How do you feel when you get a sticker response?
5. Do you think stickers can aid the promotion of indigenous languages on the social media?
6. Do you think stickers convey the facial expressions and gestures of users?

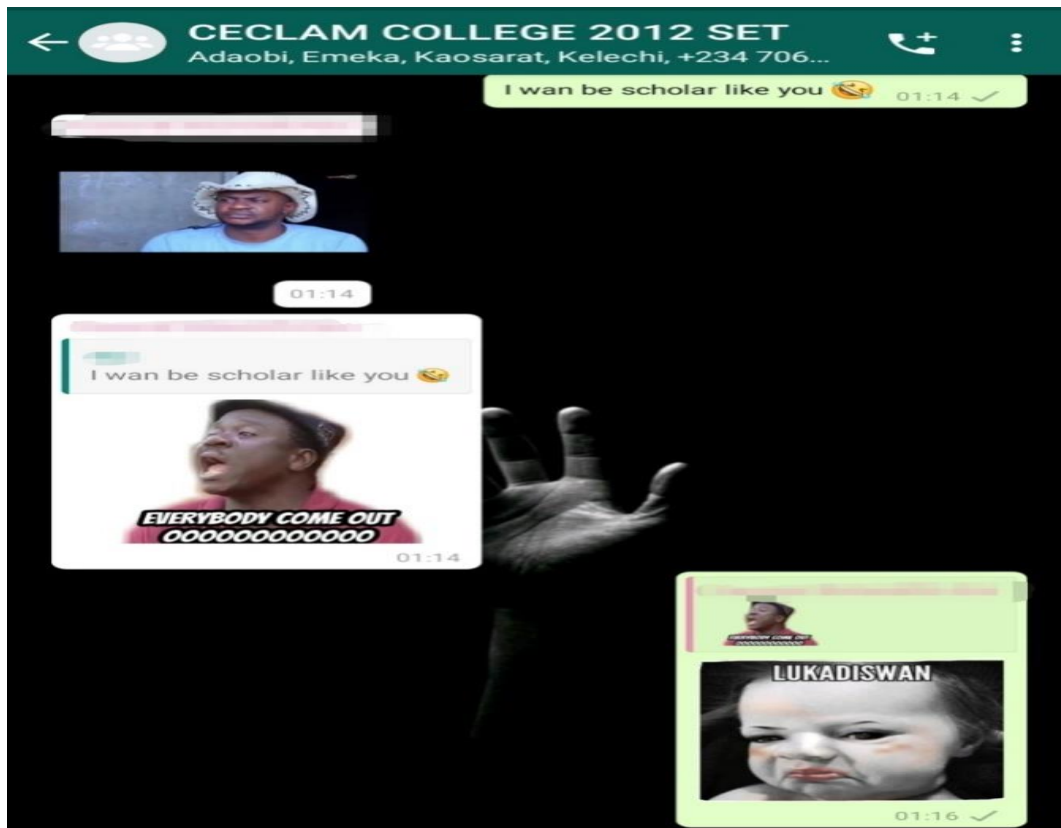
Analyzing the responses, 16 of the participants have a positive predisposition to user-generated stickers. Some maintain that it brings a deeper connection between the sender and the receiver. Some also say that it increases the power of creativity of users as they try to create more stickers that accurately suit their communication need. It was pointed out that it has more expressive powers than the conventional smileys and company-provided stickers. Lastly, it was generally agreed that it adds a touch of reality to chats. Two (2) of the participants were indifferent about the use of stickers and the remaining 2 projected outright negative predisposition. They claimed that it gets boring and annoying if too much in a serious conversation. In addition, it was observed that participants outside language related fields feel that there is no connection between stickers and indigenous language promotion. Indeed, this paper will enlighten social media users on the potentials of user-generated stickers in language promotion and revitalization.

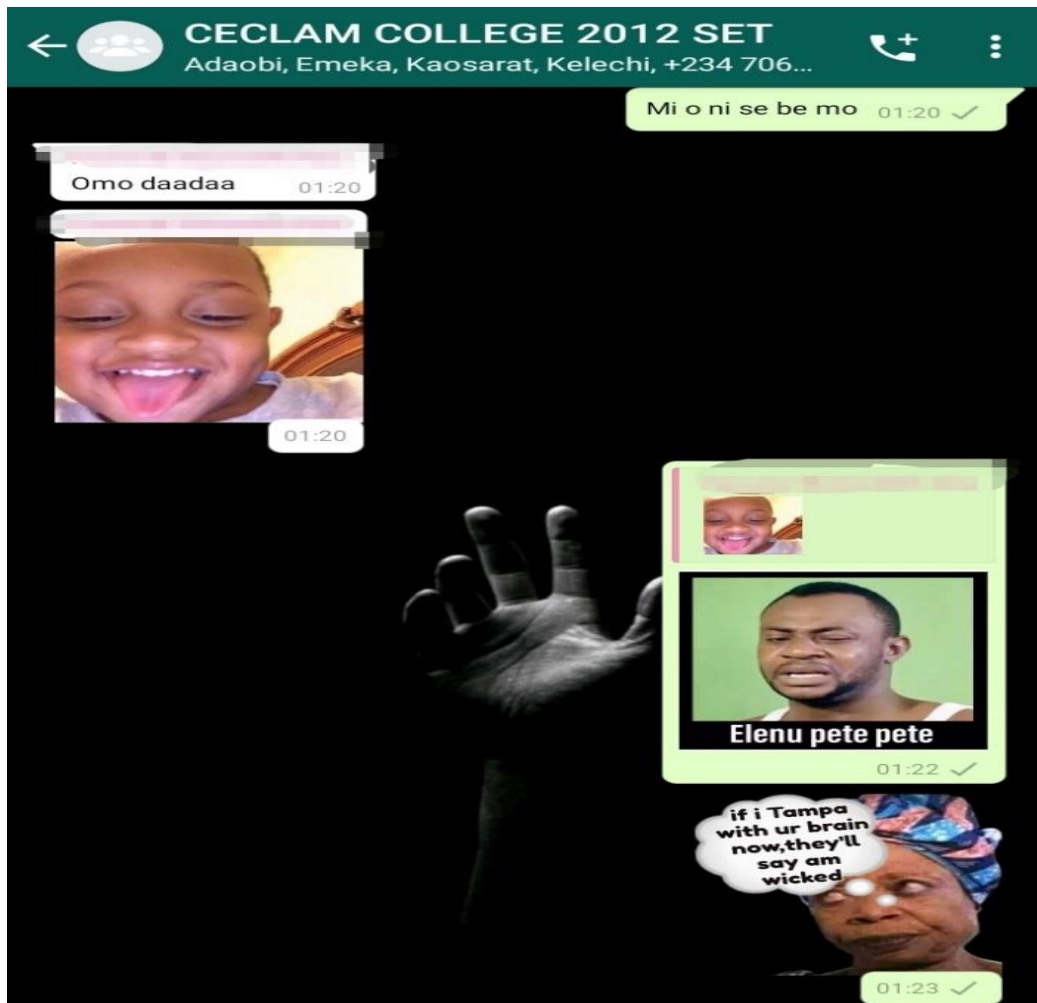
Observation on WhatsApp Groups

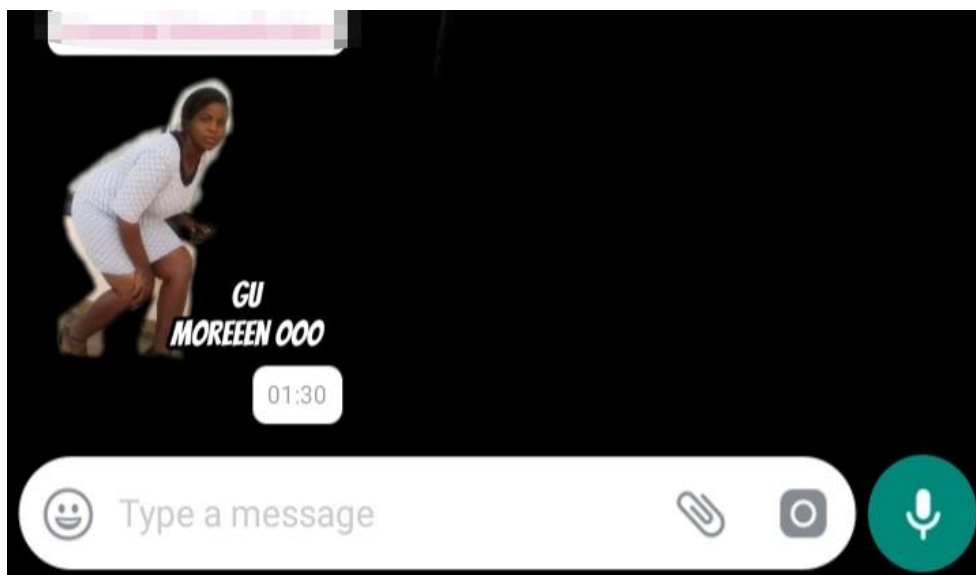
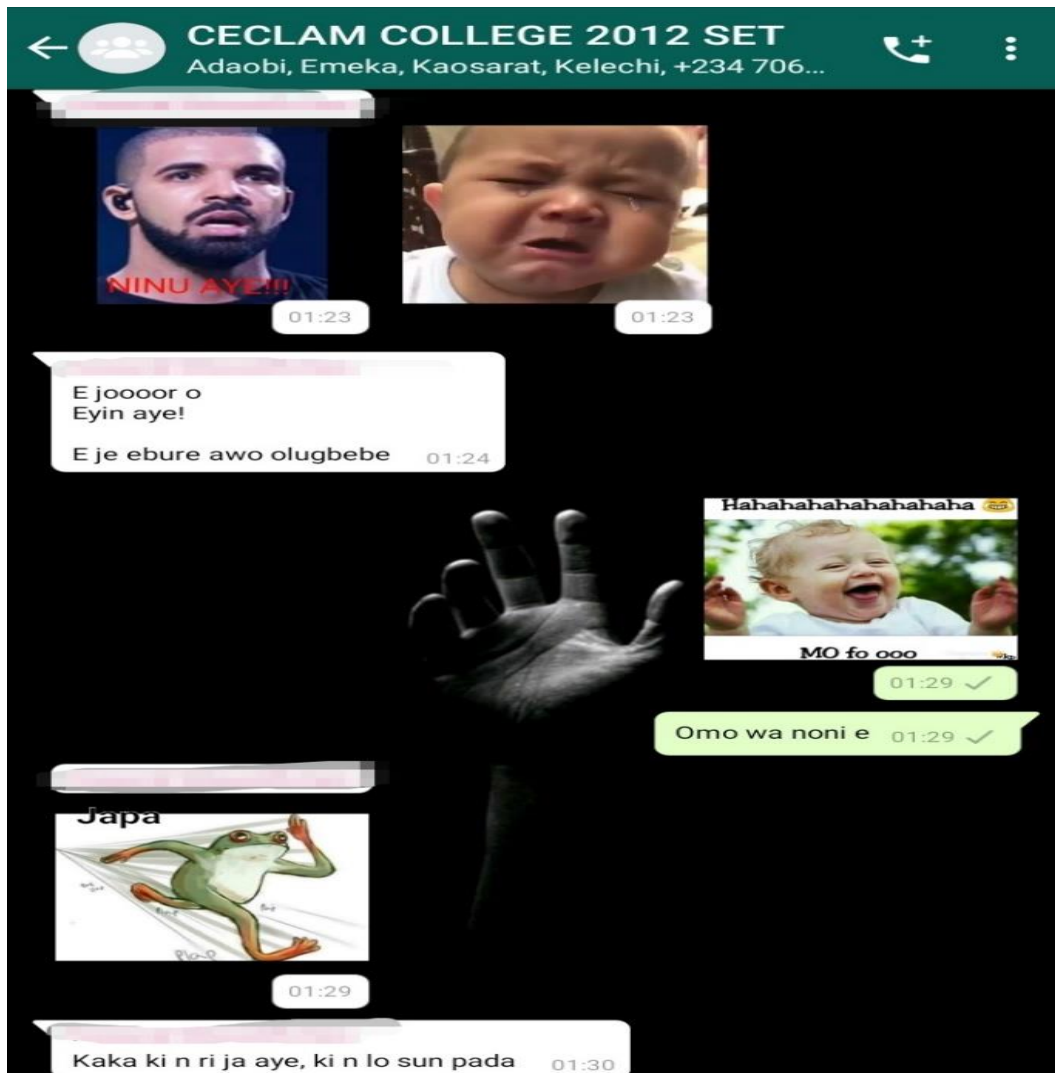
The following screenshots are from WhatsApp groups chat where the chat started with English language but switched into Yoruba/Hausa/Igbo language as a result of the usage of Yoruba/Hausa/Igbo stickers. In other words, the sticker with Yoruba/Hausa/Igbo texts induced the switch to the languages. This can occur with any language as well thereby promoting the use of indigenous languages.

YORUBA

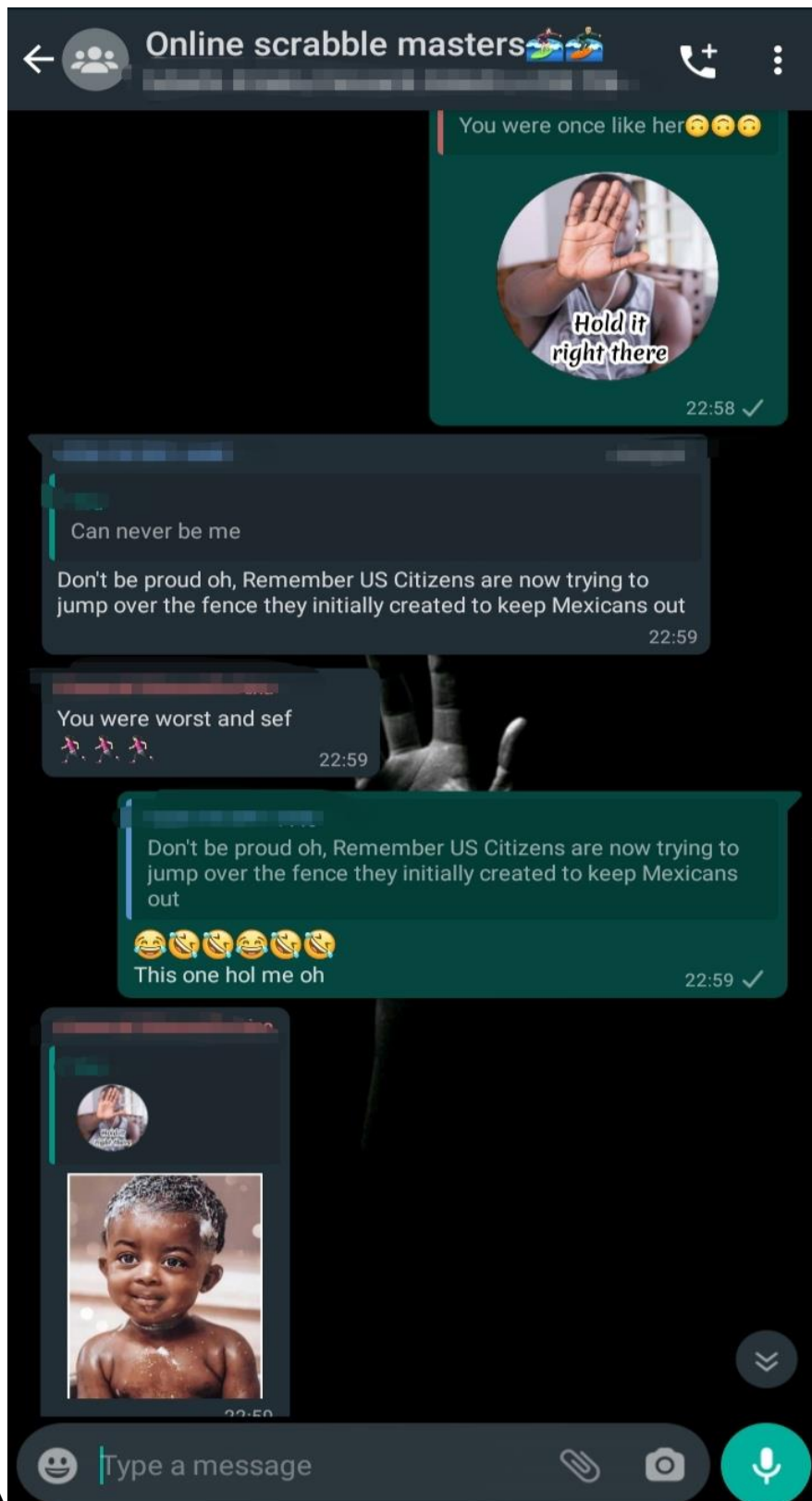




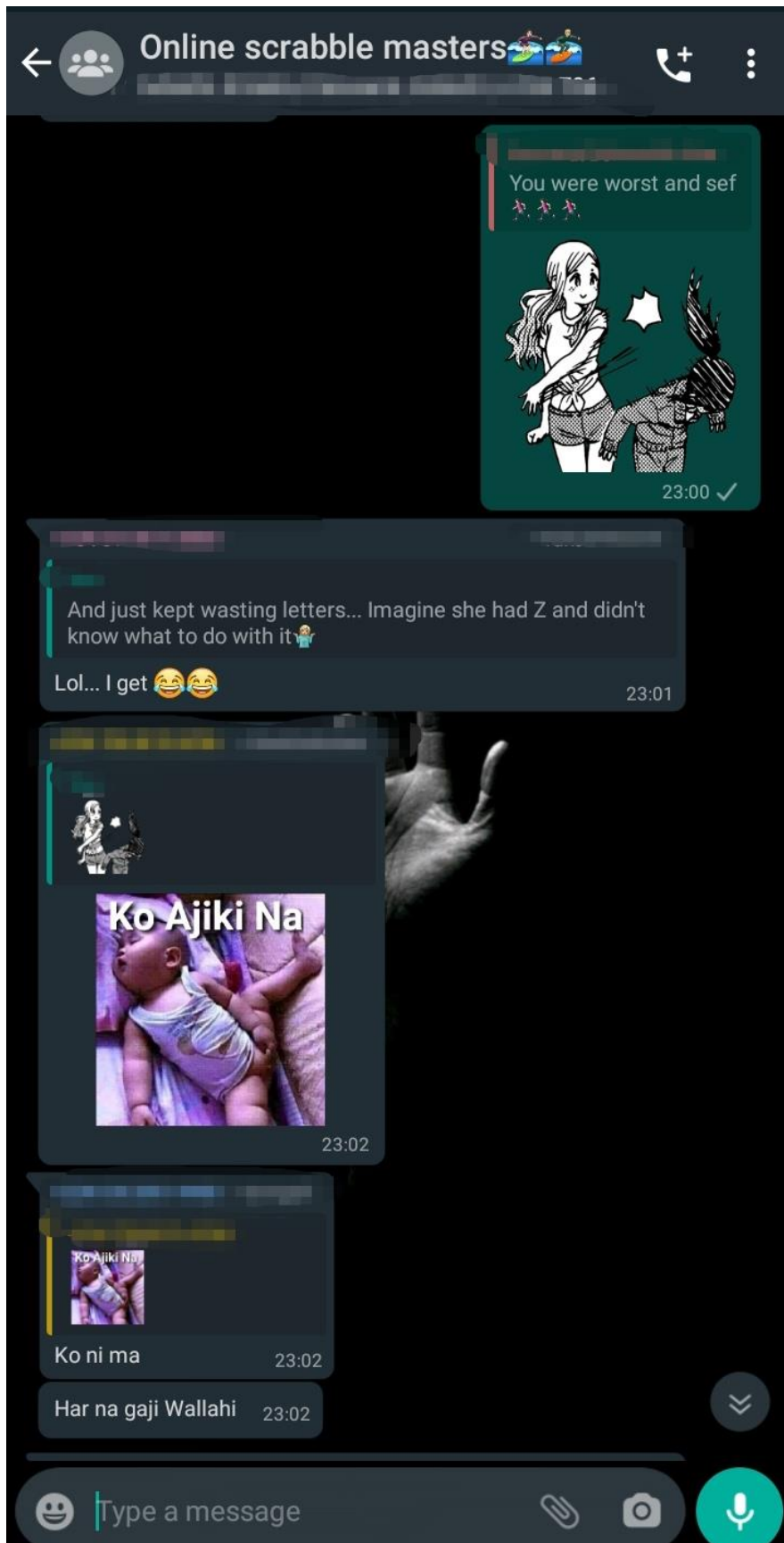


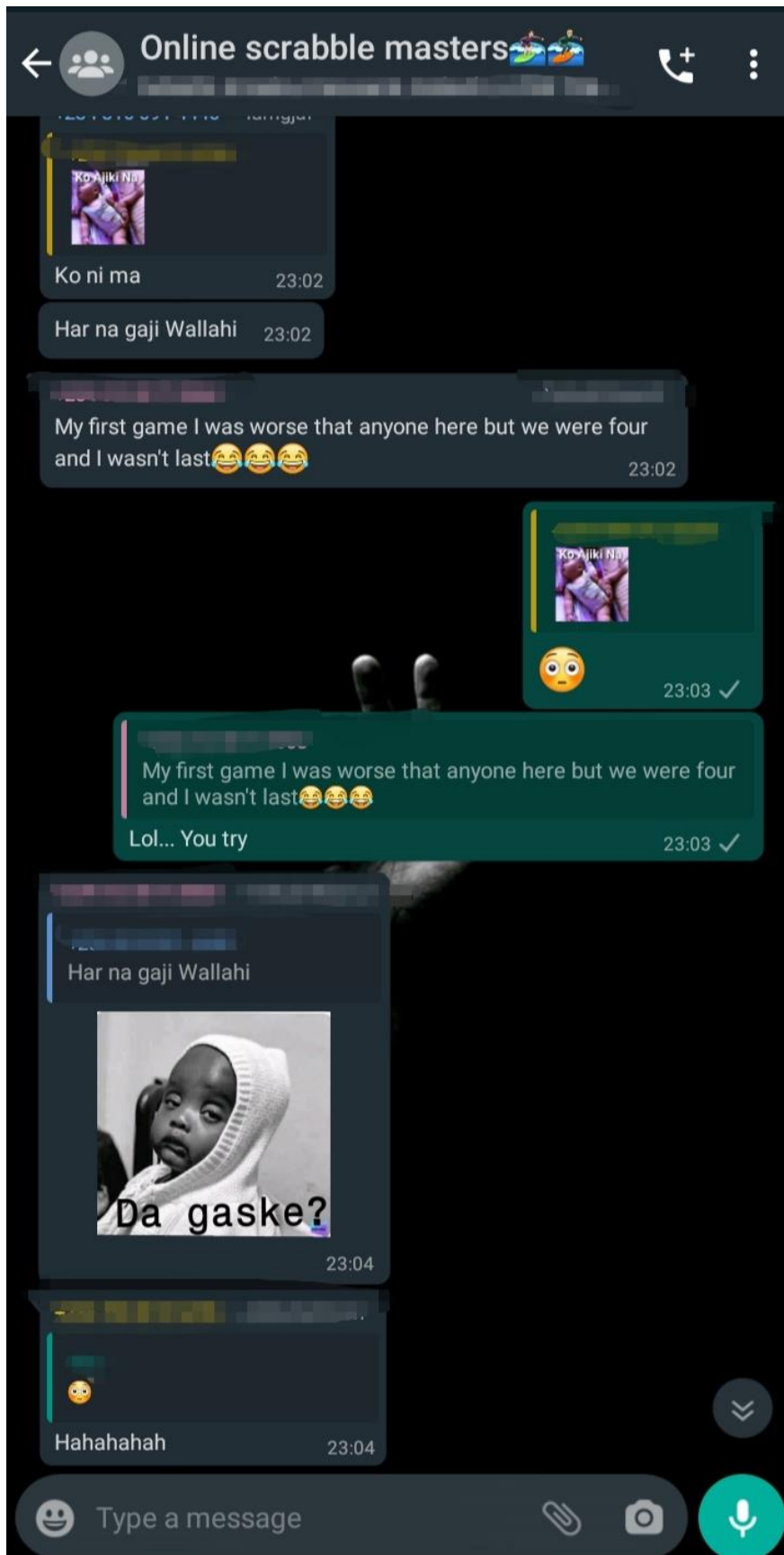


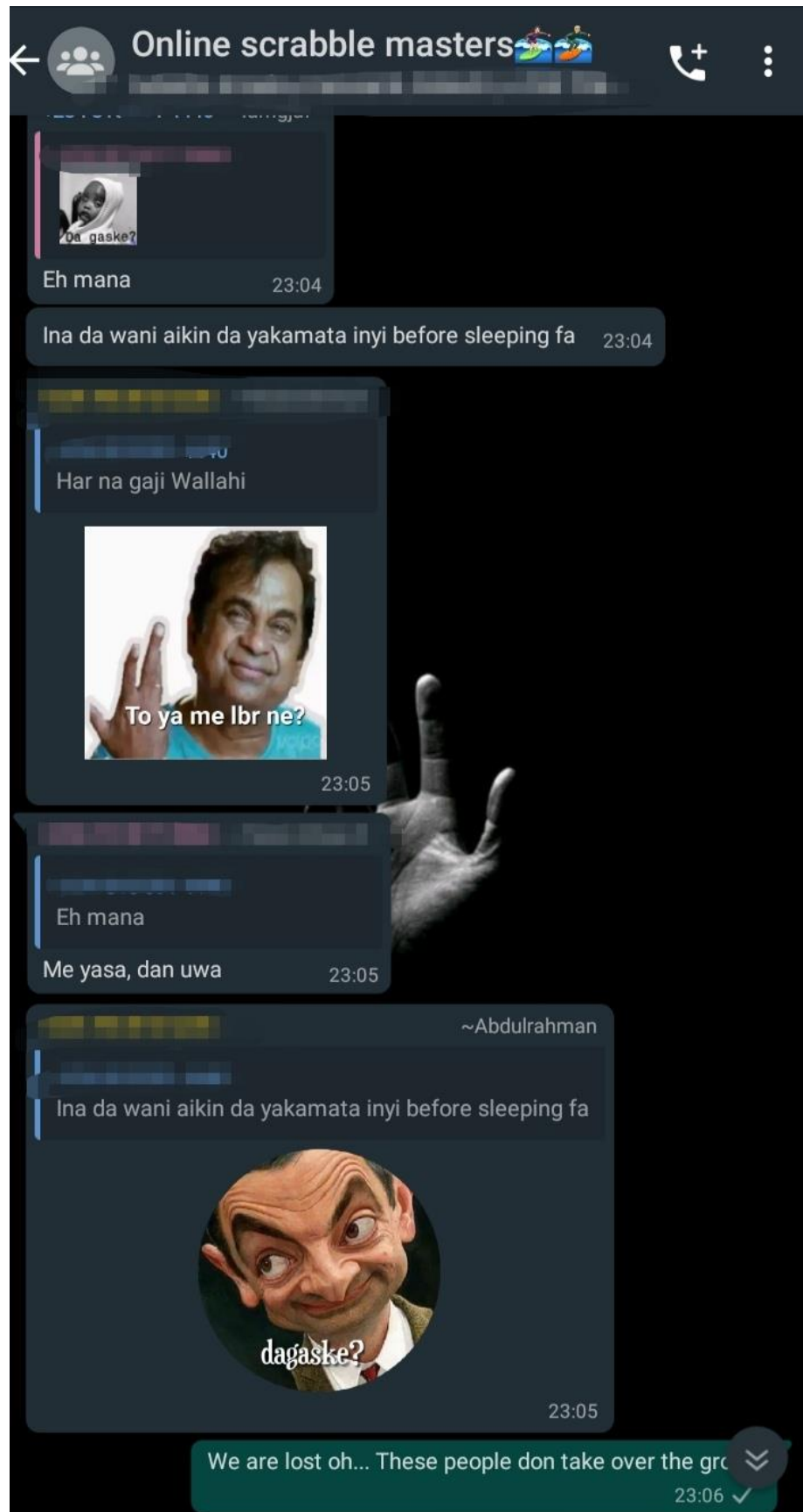
HAUSA

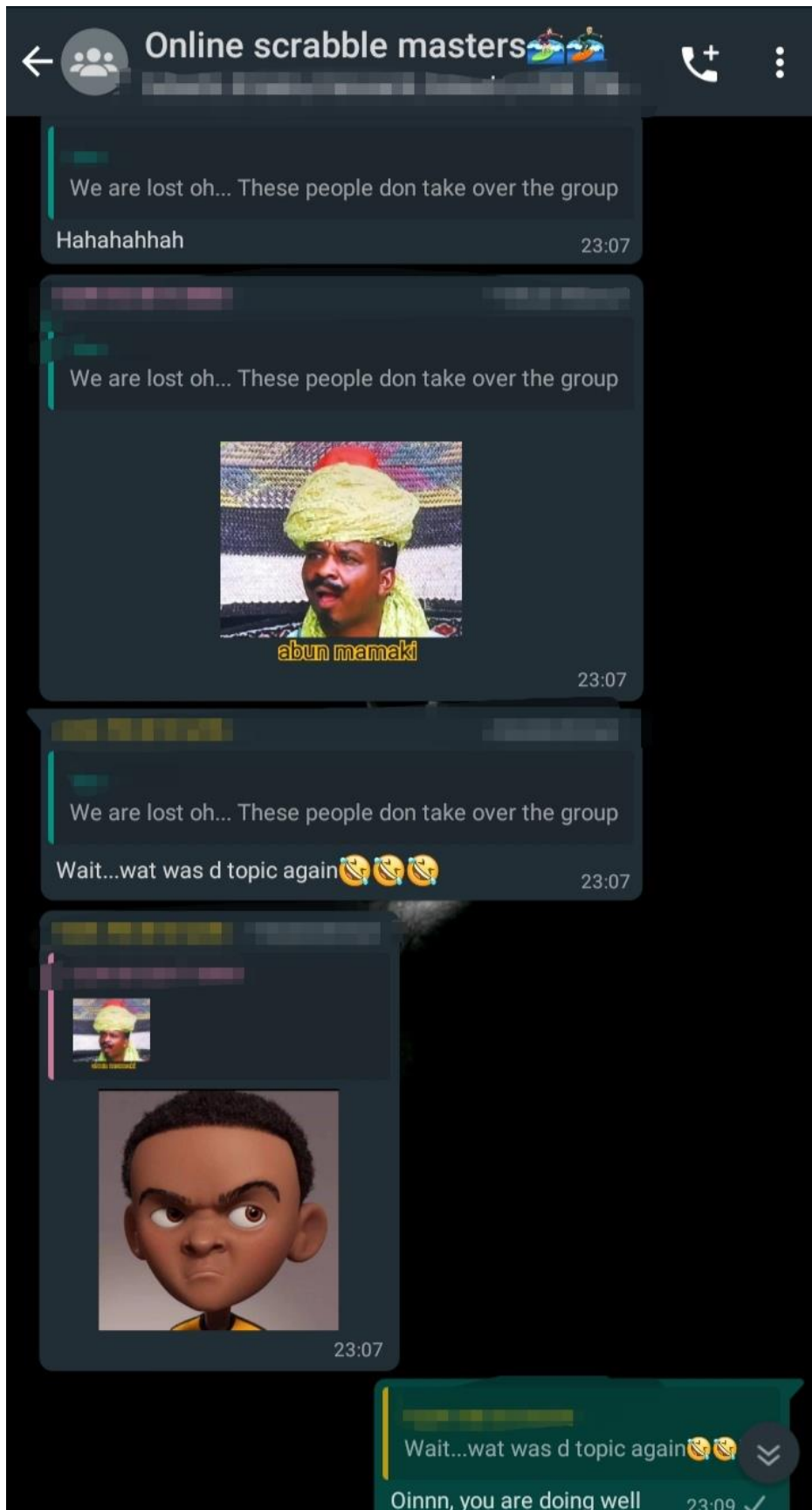


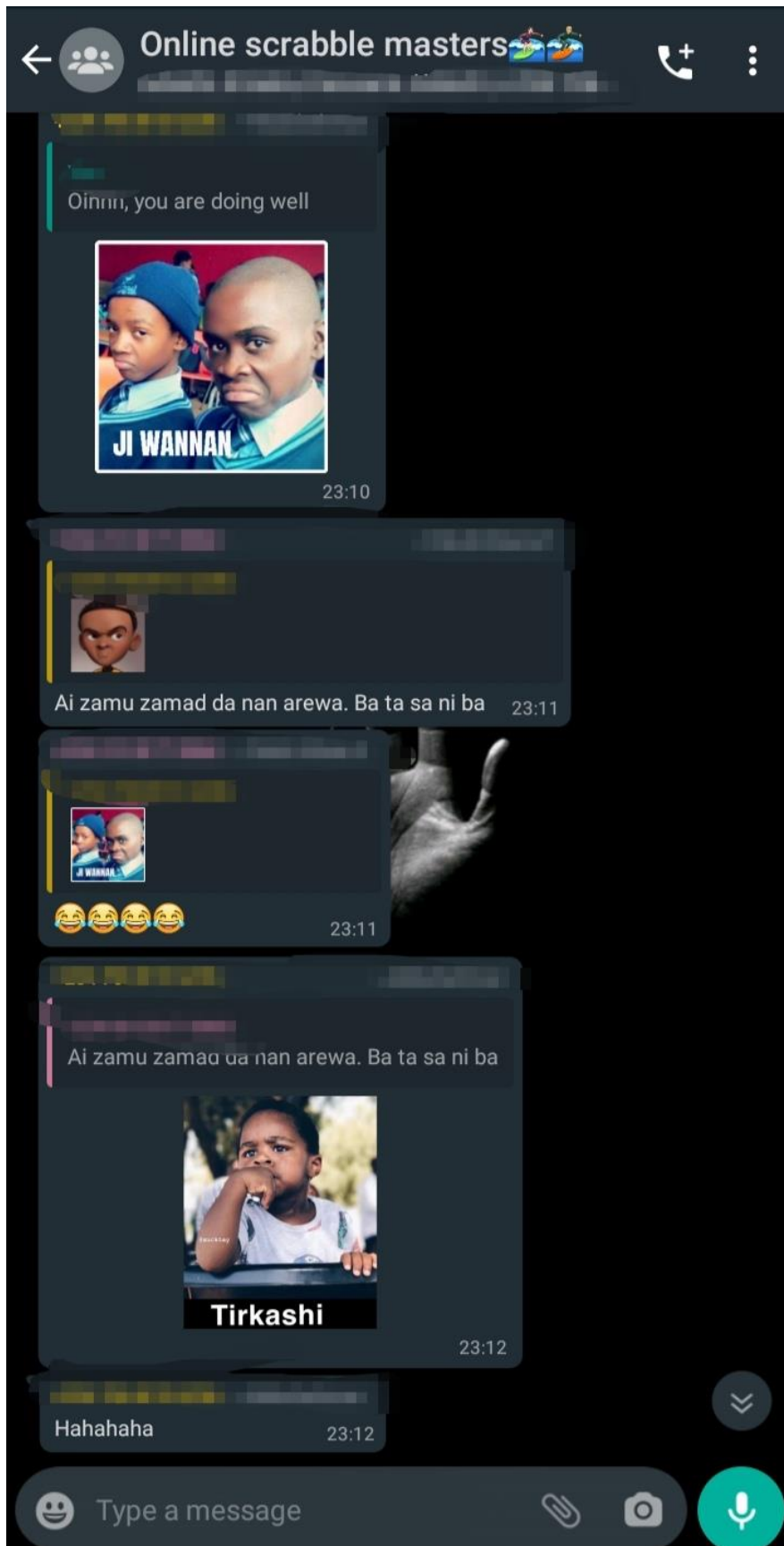
HAUSA

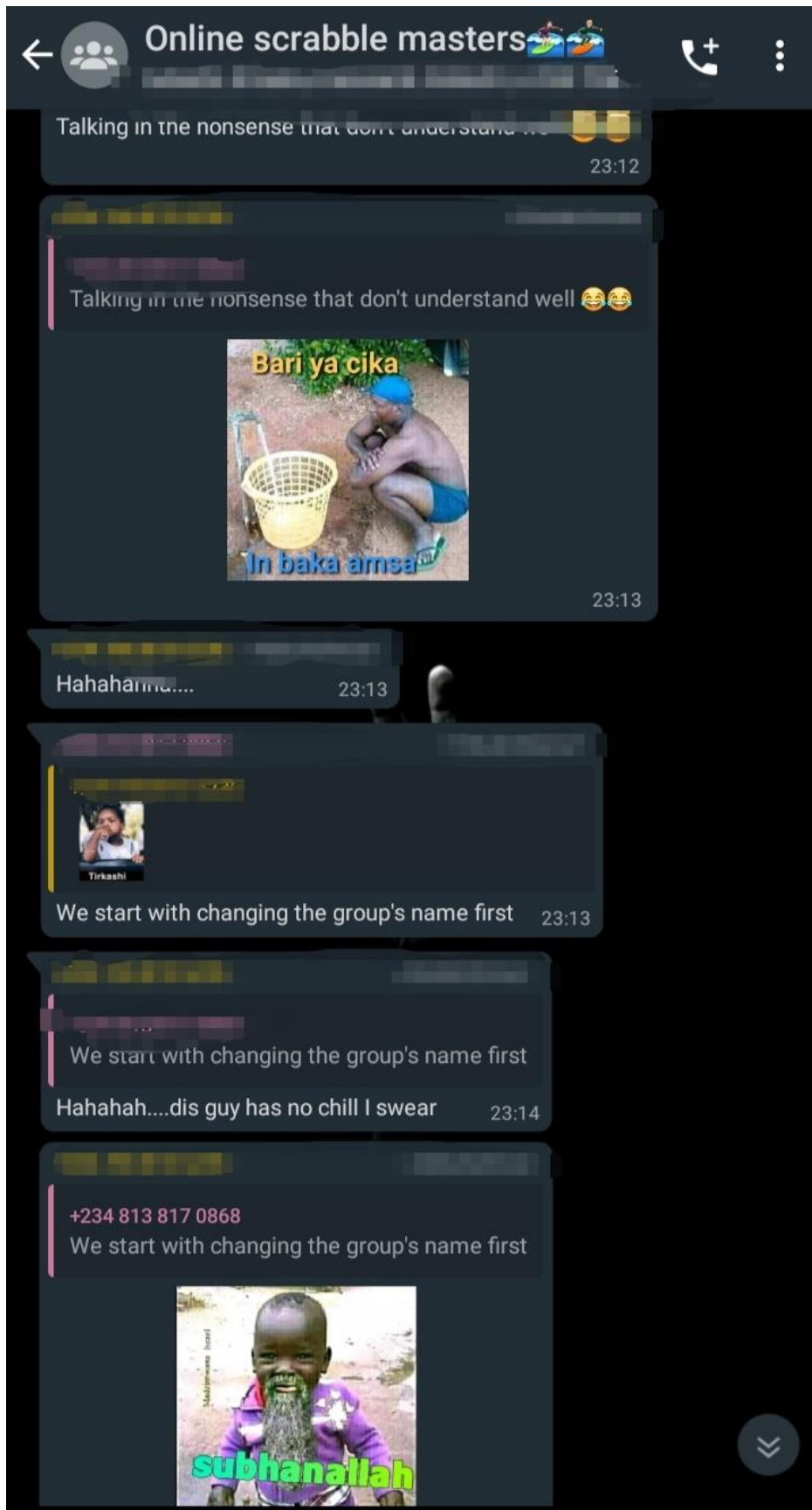


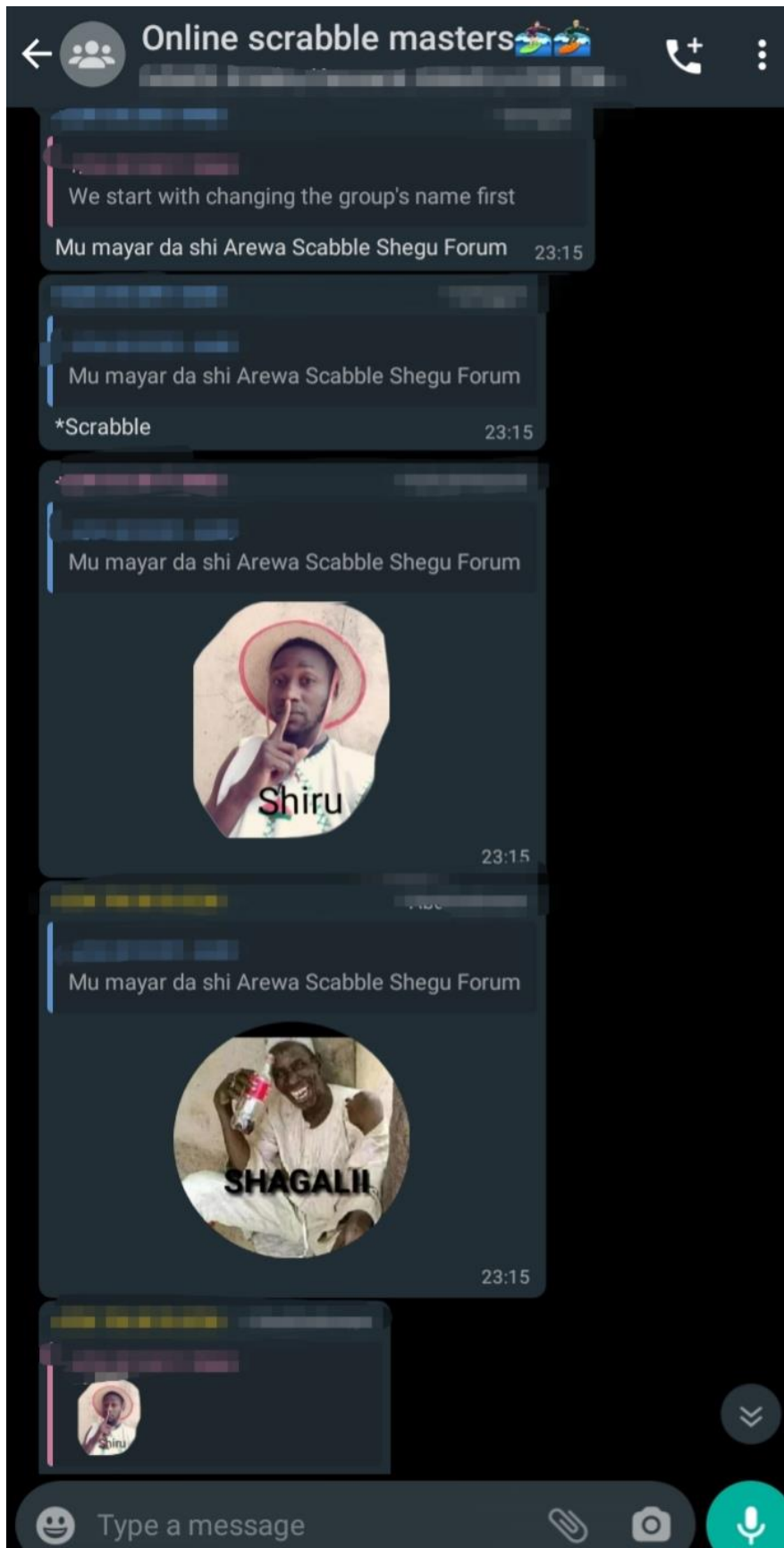








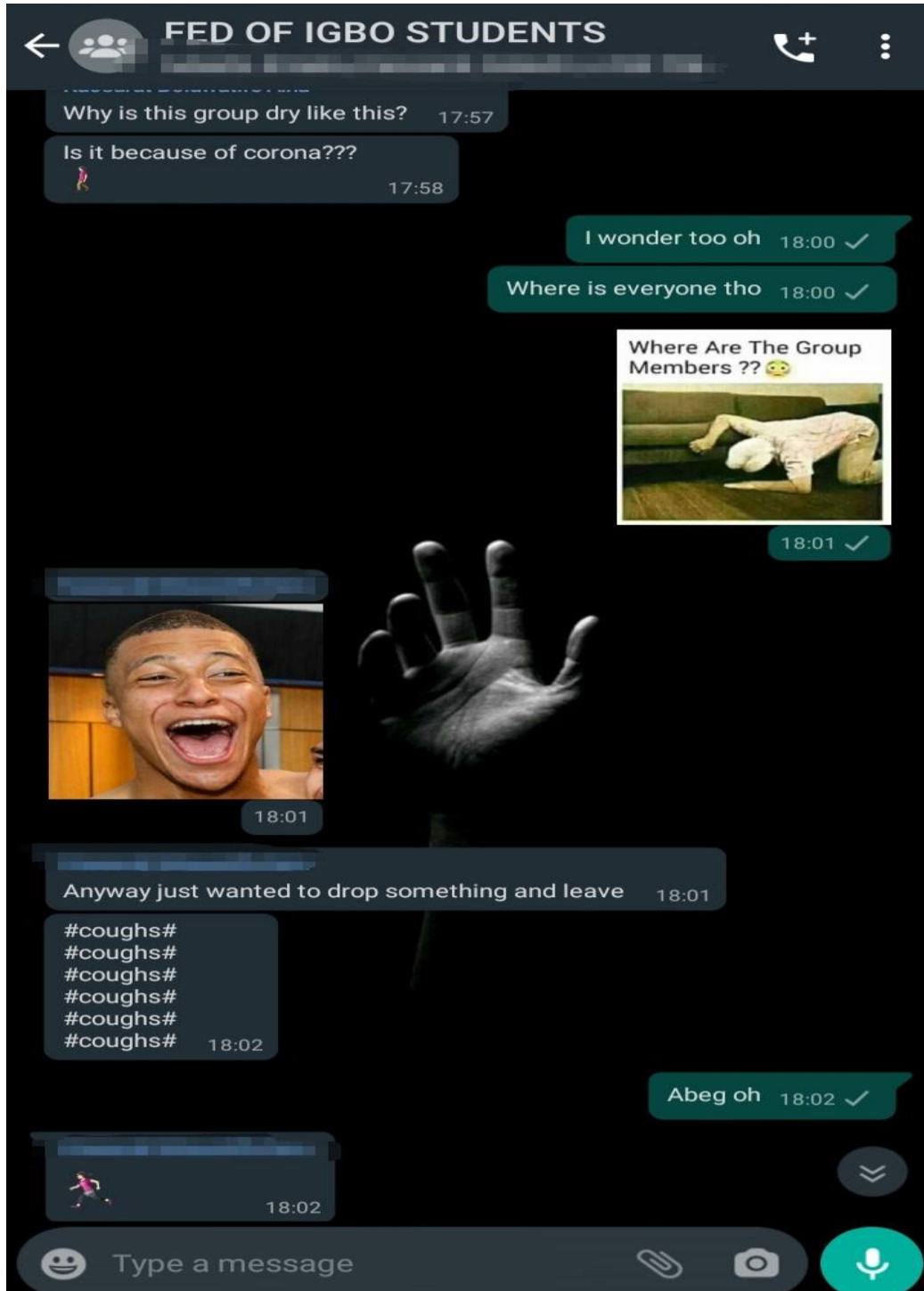


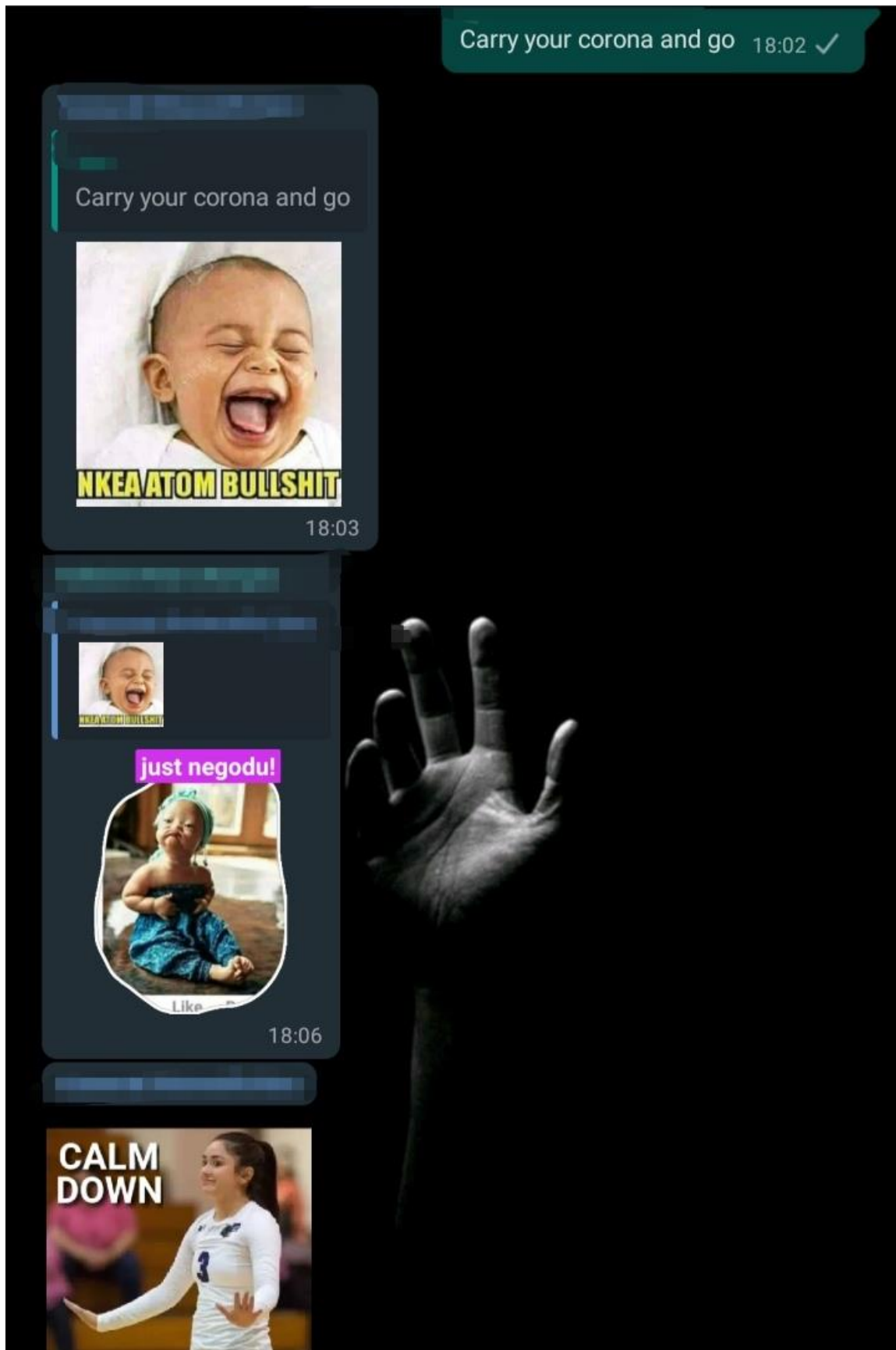


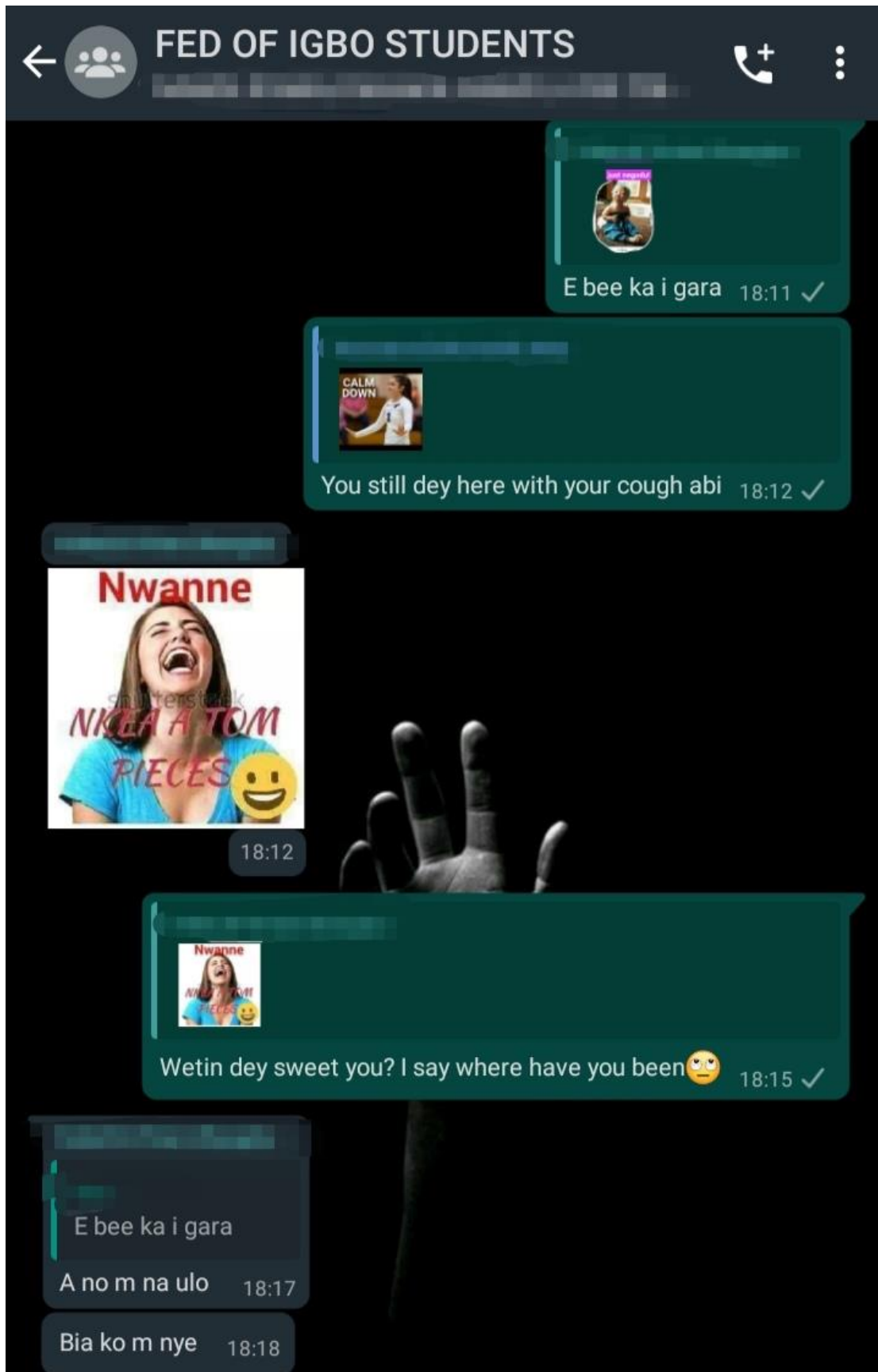


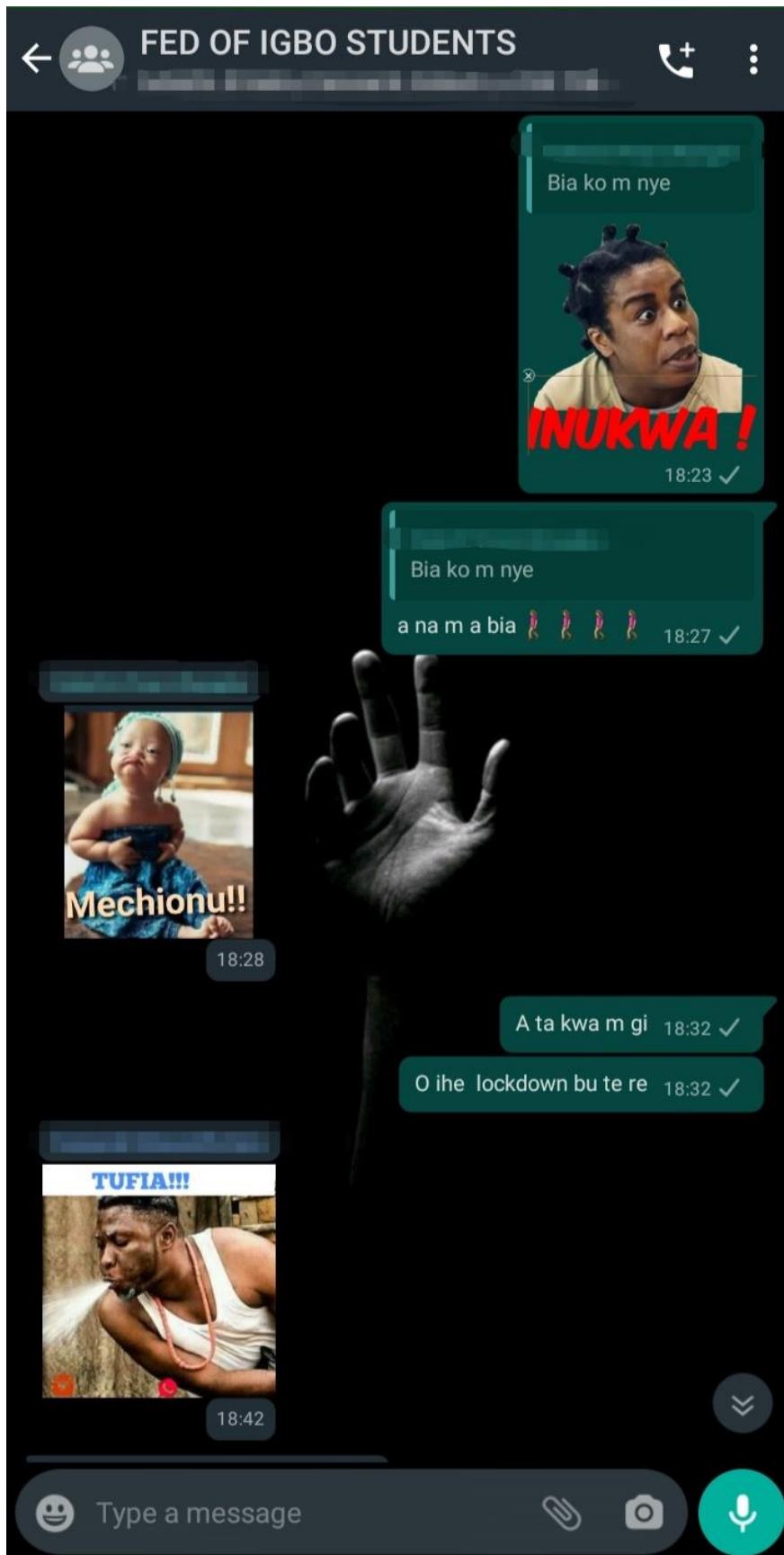


IGBO











Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper started on the note of the multilingual complexity of Nigeria and Africa at large. It also discussed the importance of language revitalization and the social media as an instrument of language revitalization through the user-generated sticker on the WhatsApp platform. Numerous data were also gathered and presented to buttress these claims. In essence, based on the finding of this research, the social media through its numerous platforms and their features can be used to promote indigenous language use and revitalization. More importantly, the user-generated sticker is an avenue to indigenize computer technology features in order to achieve the stated goals. Linguists should widen their scope and explore other domains of language use, such as the social media. Other means that can aid language revitalization besides the conventional “language documentation” should be explored. People should embrace the opportunity and usage of stickers in promoting the use of their indigenous languages. In the course of this research, while it was easy to get Yoruba and Hausa stickers, it was quite difficult to get Igbo stickers even from the speakers of the language.

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