Journal of Eastern African Studies

ISSN: 1753-1055 (Print) 1753-1063 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjea20

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To cite this article: Robert Madoi Nasaba (2021) How do I chase away this man? From Bosco to Dismas, unpacking the situated knowledges of MTN Uganda's adverts, Journal of Eastern African Studies, 15:4, 624-644, DOI: 10.1080/17531055.2021.1987699

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2021.1987699

Published online: 07 Oct 2021.

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JOURNAL OF EASTERN AFRICAN STUDIES
2021, VOL. 15, NO. 4, 624–644
https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2021.1987699

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How do I chase away this man? From Bosco to Dismas, unpacking the situated knowledges of MTN Uganda's adverts

Robert Madoi Nasaba

Department of Journalism and Communication, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda

ABSTRACT

Much of the appeal of advertisements or adverts derives from a capacity to satisfy a primordial wish for pleasurable looking. An advert essentially sets out to impress on its audience a sign with easily readable mythic meaning. The unconscious of society, however, structures materiality of adverts in such a way that recognition could quite easily be overlaid with misrecognition. This paper uses semiotics to discover where and how the visual presence of adverts works against their intended hegemonic positions. Drawing upon a poststructuralist theoretical framework, the paper's findings depart from claims to comprehensiveness and instead show a deferral of meaning. They also embrace plurality whilst questioning the validity of authorial authority. Results indicate that the alienated subject – MTN Uganda's TV adverts – gave rise to other identification tags because its target audience knowingly and willingly wanted to have agency over their stories. The counternarrative that this paper unearths in part owes its existence to social media's calling card, social endorsements or affordances, which trigger several decision heuristics. The poststructuralist situated knowledges in this case open themselves for new, unthought-of, and, perhaps, unexpected forms of knowledge production, unfolding from interrelated material-semiotic nodes.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 May 2020
Accepted 16 September 2021

KEYWORDS
Semiotics; advertisements; denotations; connotations; affordances; Uganda

In 2018, telecommunications network provider MTN Uganda commenced a robust integrated marketing communication campaign for its mobile money services. A TV advertisement spanning one minute and eight seconds crystallised the campaign. The storyboard of the advertisement pivoted on the fictitious character of a gentleman – possibly in his late thirties – introduced as Bosco. The commercial takes time to lay the immediate groundwork for its purpose. The opening frames have Bosco going anywhere and everywhere with his bicycle, including – to mention but two – a walk-through metal detector and the floor of a supermarket chain. The tonality of the commercial and depiction of Bosco invite the conclusion that he is a ruralist who is out of touch with the connected, cashless life. You could therefore hold that the commercial calls attention to not just the existence of a cashless society but also its benefits. It leverages on best practices of advertising safe in the knowledge that this yields binary answers of yes or no.

CONTACT Robert Madoi Nasaba robert.madoi@mak.ac.ug
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The intention of this paper is not to judge the merit or misguidedness of the campaign. I instead find analytical purchase in the Foucauldian idea that power is a producer of factuality and complex webs of rituality. As I will argue in this paper, it is, therefore, important to analyse how the sovereignty of MTN Uganda's power was shattered. This paper hence investigates the redistribution of emphasis that permitted the advert's intended audience to take control over the narrative and recast it on their own terms. My paper consequently undertakes a close reading of social media reactions to the advert. To this end, it is striking that the broadness and totality of the advert awed as much as boggled the mind, but probably not in the way its authors intended. I argue that young people (mostly) in Uganda made clear the need to unshackle themselves from slavish acceptances by recalibrating the advert's narrative in such a manner that reinforced their own opinions. Set against the background of being caught in a time warp, the counternarratives that emerged hold that – much like Bosco – Uganda's president, Yoweri Museveni, is out of touch. The scholarly inspiration for using an analytical lens to fathom out the paradigmical choices made is informed by the existence of syntagms, essentially a collection of signs assembled linearly.[1] Indeed, the Bosco advert carried with it syntagms that eventually created a subtle metaphoric substitution.

With an army of 16.7 million Internet users and Internet penetration rate of 45.8%,[2] Uganda has a digital media landscape that bristles with potential. The landscape, though at times an insoluble mystery, has contributed meaningfully to the creation of a counterculture that offers what I choose to call textual healing. However, as this paper will show, while the Bosco advert gave rise to other identification tags, the question of the political efficacy of these counternarratives is open to discussion. There is a school of thought that for instance says that by participating in the appropriation of the Bosco nickname, president Museveni has emptied the counternarrative of its subversive value,[3] These proponents go on to argue that the 'subaltern' political opinion of memes such as those this paper engages with humanise Museveni's political power.[4] That notwithstanding, the counternarratives in the rich discursive sphere this paper uncovers should not come as a surprise. When visual discourse is employed, the presence of variant readings is always an indispensable element in the sustained relationship between viewer and televisual sign. While the authors of these signs intend for them to produce a monolithic accumulation of conventions and even materiality, this is not always the case. Messages are detotalised in what Hall calls 'an oppositional code'.[5]

Such discrepancies in how events are signified can be traced to an intense critical engagement with semiology and semiotics. Semiology is a term that traces its roots to Ferdinand de Saussure whereas semiotics was popularised by C.S. Peirce. Both terms are couched in the science of signs with Saussure[6] particularly fronting a dyadic concept that draws apart the signifier from the signified. Extrapolating from Saussure's seminal work, Barthes[7] legitimates and perpetuates two configurations of a sign: connotations and denotations. While the denotations are taken to be 'purely literal',[8] connotations represent associative meanings. They are what Kress and Leeuwen[9] see as ideas and values expressed.

Because these active transformations are neither univocal nor uncontested, connotative configurations can be vast and heterogeneous in discursive instances. With recognition being overlaid with misrecognition, the alienated subject usually gives rise to other identification tags. This reluctant gaze of the alienated subject can leave quite a

trail of devastation. It is in many respects a conquering gaze. One that is claimed to be immaterial while materialising what it embraces. It is important to note that visual images typically consummate the milieu of the imaginary. Such ambiguity warns us that an articulation of the "I" (i.e. subjectivity) is never far away. It also shows the limits of shrugging off the recognition/misrecognition binary.

When what Hall calls 'fragments of ideology'[10] do eventually surge to the fore, they tend to destroy the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the alienated subject. The privileged position is accorded to the connotative inflection given by the discourse. This is even more so for television advertisements. The function of advertisements is to reproduce as accurately as possible the interacting layers intrinsic to the overarching theme. Much of the television advertisements' appeal, however, derives from oppositional elements. As Hall succinctly notes, broadcasters would rather viewers 'operat[e] within the "dominant" or "preferred" code [where there is] perfectly transparent communication. Instead, what they have to confront is "systematically distorted communication"'.[11]

This is not to say that advertisements carry a loss of sense in society. The aim of their character construction is in fact to create realistic individuals. Their visual presence is not supposed to portray a hermetically sealed word as much as speak to the unconscious of society in a thought-provoking way. TV advertisements have a structured form which as a social construct is supposed to be intrinsically linked to the human psyche. They also have – as Bruce and Yearley observe – a multilayered, intertextual and heterogeneous character. Bruce and Yearley hold thus: 'Television advertisements are commonly highly intertextual since that provides the advertiser with a way of presenting complex ideas and sentiments within the few seconds of airtime available.'[12] While the denotative level of a televisual sign is, in the words of Hall, 'fixed by certain, very complex [but limited or closed] codes',[13] the connotative variant is quite the opposite with material prone to being contested, challenged and reworked. This essentially rearranges, delimits and prescribes so-called transcriptions of "reality."

In this paper, I therefore zoom in for a close-up of how the architecture of the web 2.0 allows Ugandans get agency over their stories via transcriptions of "reality." The paper is based on six randomly selected memes (social media posts to the Bosco advert) that went viral in Uganda. I subjected the memes to a thorough study with the aim of teasing out literal and connotative inflections. Since the aforesaid inflections owe their existence to technological affordances, I reduce the concept to its constituent parts. I then proceed to show how and why affordances presented themselves in the Bosco advert. This sets the stage for the findings of the study to be laid out and summarily discussed.

Semiotic values of computational representations

Scholarship on how ruler and ruled appropriate humour to speak to their lived experiences continues to gain traction across different African specificities. Africans have used a vast array of popular narrative strategies ranging from rumour (Kenyans on Twitter or KOT coalescing around the hashtag #whatwouldmagufulido)[14] to humour (how a Facebook account titled Baba Jukwa evoked a vernacular discourse in the run-up to the Zimbabwean 2013 election by convening an 'unruly public' that was transnational in its reach)[15] to appropriate – even neuter – voices that represent capital and

power. As well as attributing the ubiquity of political rumour to strong oral traditions strewn across Africa, Nyamnjoh argues that its presence forces rulers who are usually economical with information to dialogue with the ruled. He also goes on to note that technological innovations have done most of the heavy lifting in buttressing rumour. He for instance cites the 'role the cellphone played in the rumoured death of President Paul Biya in 2004.'[16] So, in their disruptiveness, digital spaces have succeeded in incubating oppositional countercultures. These new digital mechanisms keep challenging the traditional understanding of media logic. Their interpretive works seen through parodies and memes (to mention but two) have particularly proved to be popular.

Memes are a classic example of what Scott chooses to call 'hidden transcripts' in which 'anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination'[17] are brought to bear. They are essentially, adds Plevriti, 'multimodal symbolic artefacts created, circulated, and transformed by countless mediated cultural participants.'[18] Memes satirising politics have swept across the African continent. Adegoju and Oyebode[19] for instance show how Internet memes produced during the Nigerian 2015 election established humour as a discursive resource. In Uganda, Bizonto, a comedy group, uses humour to speak truth to president Museveni with skits that are widely shared on social media.[20] Joining Bizonto is a legion of youth in the East African nation whose bottom-up expression of political criticism is rife on varying digital spaces. These youth repurpose audiovisual (like the Bosco advert) and textual content for civic and political engagement. Mbembe holds that the memes, which are for the most part 'obscene and grotesque … need to be understood as a deliberately cynical operation'[21] in which the ruled present their rulers as ordinary mortals. Put another way, the ridicule is intended to domesticate rulers by peeling away layers of power.

Broadly speaking, the repurposing of texts and ease by which such technological artefacts expand in different folksonomies owe much to affordances in the era of transmediality. This process of transfer of content from original medium to something non-media specific elicits what Lister et al. call 'active modes of spectatorship'.[22] It is these active modes of spectatorship that in a sense embody a technological affordance. Lunenfeld describes affordances as 'possibilities for action'[23] that are manifested and become notable on technological artefacts through likes, shares or other such measurements of response to an item.

So the ease by which information can be reproduced and transmitted far beyond its initial context of production is at the very heart of technological affordances. The intersection between affordances and semiotic values of computational representations continues to intrigue many scholars not least Harrell[24] who concedes that the former move users beyond passive reception. Such users in turn tend to take risks in online spaces that they would otherwise find impossibly difficult offline. These affordances of anonymity layer complexity – even confusion – into online environments by 'enabl[ing] users [to] create giga-, tera-, and even petabytes of new data in the form of texts, pictures, sound files and video'.[25]

While operating online, users find themselves burdened by an overwhelming expectation to showcase social media logic. Altheide likens such logic to common sense rationality, adding that it 'tends to be evocative; encapsulates, highly thematic, familiar to audiences, and easy to use'.[26] The more proficient one is at showcasing this logic, the more likes, shares, retweets and other such affordances they get. TV advertisements in

particular have interacting layers that tend to make the real world intersect with affordances. Put simply, the adverts offer fodder to digital natives with a strong grasp of social media logic. The aforesaid digital natives particularly thrive in what Crow has labelled a linguistic community.[27] This community is known to abhor the tyranny of words in preference for exploring texts with much invention.

Two interrelationships push the limits of the performances of words and indeed other signs. The first, in no particular order, involves the application of a syntagmatic choice. Here the relationship is with words that precede and follow each other. The second gives into paradigmatic relations. Here words that could have stood in the other's place are illuminated. The interrelationships in a sense provide a fertile ground for metaphors. Advertisements have never been comfortable in the presence of metaphors. Yet that notwithstanding what tends to happen – at least with the Bosco advert – is that a product gets imbued with facets it is not readily associated with.

Finding textual healing in Uganda

The subtle negotiation around power in digital spaces while hardly a normative idea is commonplace in Uganda. Digital spaces are known to give people in the East African nation the opportunity to have insightful political conversations. Although all things digital are supposedly in the embryonic stage, a study[28] revealed that Twitter accounts in Africa – to which Uganda belongs – tend to be more political than those from USA and the UK to an eye-watering percentage ratio of 8.6:2. With political polarisation on the rise and trust in the media on the wane, technology continues to profoundly shape democracy in Africa. African politicians for one interface with their subjects on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Even heads of state who are digital immigrants such as Uganda's Yoweri Kaguta Museveni have become fully aware that their subjects consume political information populated on social networks. The intersection of technology and politics became more definite and clear during the Arab Spring between 2010-11. Although the scale of impact remains a subject of debate, the role of digital technologies in fomenting political change during the Arab Spring protests in African countries like Egypt and Tunisia is widely acknowledged.[29] This could be squarely down to the fact that social networks like Twitter and Facebook privilege a discourse that is simple, impulsive, and uncivil.

What we were able to witness with the 'Bosco' advert was a reaffirmation of the aforesaid interest in politics. A discourse that was simple, impulsive, and uncivil was fostered across different social networks. We also saw the extent to which technological affordances occasion varying levels of engagement with advertising texts. The culture of social endorsement on social networks has diversified the way in which audiences are exposed and summarily engage with such texts. There are many layers to be unpacked when the contours of this subject matter are explored. For starters, it is important to note as does Anspach[30] that social endorsements serve as a subtle heuristic cue, habituating audiences as it were to subject matters that duly merit attention.

There is, however, a moderating factor here to be appreciated. It pivots on the assumption that attitudes are reinforced through both confirmation and disconfirmation biases. Garrett[31] addressed this pertinent issue of selective processes by acknowledging the presence of an either/or binary. People can either choose to actively avoid attitude-

challenging information or seek attitude reinforcements. Such discrepancies owe their existence to a congeniality bias. The selective perception leaves the door ajar for what Hall calls 'a residual pluralism [to] evade the course,'[32] giving rise to variant readings.

I broadly locate my discussion within the theory of selective exposure simply because what we witnessed in Uganda was people mentally dissecting information they were exposed to in a televisual commercial. They selected favourable fragments from the Bosco commercial and interacted with them on digital platforms as they pleased. What then ensued was the logic of 'trench warfare' where views were crystallised through contradiction or dissonance. Bosco ceased to be Bosco on the digital spaces. He instead morphed into Museveni, Uganda's head of state since 1986, and social affordances propagated this narrative almost exponentially. This textual healing was neither incidental nor subsidiary. The information technology infrastructure in Uganda while still a work in progress has vast potential. Digital spaces have allowed Ugandans to display more noticeably a tendency to exercise greater control over not just their personal but also national narratives. The number of Ugandans on digital spaces has continued to advance in proportion as they acquire more disposable money.

A 2018 study, which is part of market research firm Ipsos's syndicated Affluent Surveys, takes note of pervasive difficulties that make Africa lag behind other regions in the world when it comes to Internet penetration.[33] It, however, hastens to add that there is a complementary and perhaps even more widespread illusion – the illusion that Africa is not embracing the digital revolution. The study strongly suggests that the digital revolution is catching on in Africa. This view is aptly exemplified in findings that point to affluent Africans in seven countries – with Uganda inclusive – embracing digital technology more rapidly than their European counterparts. The study engages with media use and consumption behaviour of the top 15% of income earners (totalling 3,000) in main cities of the aforesaid seven African countries. An affinity with social media in Uganda particularly stood out with a staggering 83% of affluent Ugandans surveyed reporting that they used the Internet to access their social networks. Females and 17–34 year olds were found to be the most active social networkers. Other activities like e-mail (14%), listening to music (21%), watching videos (13%), blogging (3%), sports betting (4%) and academic research (7%) seemed to carry a loss of relevance whenever the affluent Ugandans were using the Internet.

The study also shows the limits of using desktop computers when it comes to accessing the Internet. Just 4% of the affluent Ugandans use the desktop to access the Internet. The laptop was not far ahead at 7%. Rather, 94% of affluent Ugandans use a mobile phone to access the Internet. Much of its appeal derives from its portability. None of the interacting layers of this survey contest, challenge or even rework previous findings. If anything, the survey reproduces as accurately as possible findings of the Collaboration on International ICT Policy.[34] In a report, the Collaboration on International ICT Policy shone light on some fundamental numbers such as Uganda having 16.7 million Internet users. This gives the East African nation an Internet penetration rate of 45.8%. The report put the total bandwidth of Internet in Uganda at 41,695.3 Mbps and mobile phone subscriptions 22,034,837.

Despite or perhaps because of these impressive figures, the government of Uganda has moved to regulate the online space both implicitly and explicitly. The Computer Misuse Act assented to by president Museveni in November of 2010 has been tailored to tone

down the tenor of critiques carried on cyberspace. Elsewhere, a tax levied during the 2018–19 Financial Year on over-the-top or OTT services for Internet users seeking to access social media platforms in Uganda was widely seen as an implicit barrier. In Information Communication Technology Association of Uganda's report,[35] the exasperation of Ugandans about having to pay Shs 200 (∼0.05 USD) on a daily basis was so manifestly shown. When asked 'is the OTT tax inconveniencing you?', 71% responded that they were 'extremely' inconvenienced; 17% 'very much; 4% 'moderately'; 2% 'slightly' and 6% 'not at all.'

In its defence, the government of Uganda holds that it continues to use and build a vast infrastructural technology for enhancing governance. It further proffers that a vast array of ICT tools have been put in place in order to increase accountability. A United Nations E-Government Survey offers support.[36] The survey ranked Uganda 128 out of 193 countries, scoring a 0.3599 that is well within the reach of the 0.4922 global average in the E-Government Development Index (EGDI). This was a marked improvement of 28 places from Uganda's previous placement at 156 in 2014. It gets even better when it comes to the E-Participation Index (EPI), with Uganda placing 91 out of 193 countries surveyed.

So, the implicit and explicit barriers notwithstanding, new spaces have given Ugandans a semblance of control over their personal and national narratives. These spaces – particularly those on social media – have consequently proceeded to constitute so-called 'filter bubbles' or 'echo chambers.' These 'filter bubbles' allow likeminded people to talk to each other and subsequently have their biases reaffirmed rather than critiqued and challenged. This corresponds with fears that Sunstein[37] amplified where extreme opinions are not squared with or confronted by counter arguments. People are as a result less exposed to opposing perspectives and moderating impulses.

It should be noted that the thesis the echo chamber posits has encountered criticism from scholars like Brundidge.[38] It appears that the Habermasian ideal that debaters are swayed by the quality of arguments remains relevant. Yet scholars (Bennett and Manheim[39]; Iyengar and Hahn[40]) rightly pick out a tendency by social media users to habituate themselves to content a friend deemed to be fascinating. Bücher[41] has observed that algorithms that expose people to content based on previous preferences have only served to stir up subjective processes. An algorithm put simply is a set of rules that determines how various operations interact with each other.[42] Facebook's algorithm, which essentially runs a user's news feed, is sorted by a string of subtle operations. One of those operations makes information from people with whom a user regularly interacts more prominent. This, some would say, increases the likelihood of discussions taking place in an echo chamber since we regularly interact with likeminded people. Attitudes are reinforced by the affordances of the digital platform.

This paper does not set out to find whether its subjects avoid attitude-challenging information or pursue attitude reinforcements. It rather attempts to show how its subjects – most if not all of whom are on Facebook – take control over the narrative of their lives and recast it on their own terms. In so doing, the subjects in question are believed to get textual healing. This textual healing is largely brought on by several decision heuristics made possible by the architecture of the web 2.0. What we have consequently witnessed is a disruption of Uganda's society. The centre is being subverted with "prosumers" communicating directly with each other. This is the very embodiment

of the networked public sphere proffered by Benkler.[43] This new iteration of the public sphere essentially witnesses a 'shift from a hub-and-spoke architecture with unidirectional links to the end points in the mass media, to distributed architecture with multidirectional connections among all nodes in the networked information environment.'[44]

The government of Uganda has on its part moved to rip apart the apparatus that legitimates and perpetuates disruption. It was in 2007 that Safaricom launched a mobile-based platform that allows subscribers to use their handsets to make financial transactions. The service known then and now as m-Pesa was birthed in Kenya, which is Uganda's eastern neighbour. Nyabola observes that a year into m-Pesa's launch, 'nearly two million people subscribed to the service, rising to 10 million with in the first three years.'[45] It didn't take long for Ugandans to warm up to m-Pesa-esque services. Telephony companies rendering the service opted to simply call it mobile money. This mobile money service was the bedrock of MTN Uganda's Bosco TV advert. The rather robust advertising was done at a time the Ugandan government had moved to levy an additional tax on mobile money transactions of receiving, payment and withdrawals valued at 1% of the value of any transaction. After bitter protestations from the public, the Ugandan government had a climbdown that saw them significantly scale back on charges levied. The government attributed the climbdown to an error of commission that saw it charge end users 1% on the receipts instead of 0.5.

There was, however, no such climbdown when it came to the tax levied on over-the-top or OTT services for Internet users seeking to access social media platforms. The results were stark. In Ampurire's article,[46] the tax on OTT services was paid by just 17.4% of Internet subscribers in Uganda. This translated into an 83% shortfall in the 2018–19 Financial Year. Ampurire quotes the taxman saying it only collected 49.5 billion Uganda shillings or $13 million USD. This was well below the 284 billion Ugandan shillings or $77 million USD target the Uganda Revenue Authority had set itself. No such difficulty was experienced with mobile money, which performed at 172%. A surplus of 42% was experienced with 157 billion Uganda shillings or $42 million USD collected, eclipsing the 115 billion Uganda shillings or $31 million USD target by some distance.

Worth noting is that OTT tax did not entirely stop social media users in Uganda from gaining access to social networks. Ampurire quotes the taxman saying in no uncertain terms that most Ugandans accessed the social networks via virtual private networks or VPNs and wireless networks. These Ugandans along with their tax-compliant counterparts subsequently used the digital spaces to advance views on MTN Uganda's mobile money advert that caught many, including the government, unawares.

Findings and discussion

As discussed earlier, MTN Uganda's 'Bosco' TV advertisement did more than satisfy a primordial wish for pleasurable viewing among its audience. Part of the audience went a notch further by developing a craving for misrecognition. The alienated subject eventually gave rise to other identification tags. This not only offered a blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional advertising conventions and its materiality. It also shattered the pleasure, satisfaction and privilege of the alienated subject.

Much of the misrecognition's appeal derives from nonverbal cues. In his theory of semiotics, Saussure[47] contends that the apparatus of his body of work legitimates and perpetuates an order in which signs are presented as concepts rather than language elements such as phrases and words. A hallmark of Barthes's[48] work, which borrows quite a bit from Saussure, is its acknowledgement that signs can be construed as either denotations or connotations. Denotations are couched in the what or even who is being depicted. They are, as Chandler succinctly notes, 'purely literal and universal'.[49] Kress and Leeuwen[50] have on their part noted that since connotations represent ideas and values expressed, these fragments of ideology are potentially transformable into polysemic configurations.

The findings of this study are cast within a negotiated version that contains a mixture of the literal and the connotative inflection. It is important to note that the televisual sign of the 'Bosco' advert is largely devoid of vocal language. But as Danesi notes, semioticians find a seductiveness in gesture which they consider 'to be [a] more fundamental form of communication than vocal language.'[51] Owyong[52] for instance observes that clothing can adequately convey what has been dominantly defined and professionally signified about power relationships among people. Moody et al.[53] also see the presence of clothing as an element teeming with relevance if anything because it reflects the personality of characters. This means that clothing or clothes are hardly extraneous in visual discourse. Tijana et al.[54] hold that the symbolism of clothing and appearance – even in their ambiguity – provide nonverbal clues regarding the wearer's situation(s).

Elsewhere, the unconscious manifestly shown in posture,[55] gestures,[56] facial expressions[57] and even smiles[58] consummate the milieu of the imaginary, producing identification tags. The identification tags seized upon to overlay recognition with misrecognition in the 'Bosco' advert range from a hat to bicycle. A hat has over the years been Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni's signature. He has also of recent taken little or no offence to being photographed either riding or merely pushing a bicycle. With the lead character in MTN Uganda's TV advert possessing not just a hat but bicycle for good measure, parallels were probably bound to be drawn. It also did not help matters that MTN Uganda's official colour is the same as that of president Museveni's NRM party – yellow.

A syntagmic relation was consequently created with the non-linear combination affecting the value of signs in the 'Bosco' TV advert. There were also metaphoric substitutions resulting from application of various paradigmical choices. Indeed, the meaning conjured from the collection of signs – call it signification – was occasioned by a non-linear combination with particular properties the advert did not readily associate itself with.

Figure 1 is a print advert that MTN Uganda sanctioned after the music bed of the 'Bosco' TV advert proved quite popular. In this print advert we see Bosco just as he appears in the TV advert. He has his unmistakable bicycle and is sporting a hat. Also worth noting is the screaming yellow backdrop. As mentioned earlier, yellow is MTN's official colour.

Figure 2 is a still image taken by the Presidential Press Unit during one of president Museveni's wealth creation tours across the East African nation. The president was trying to show locals how irrigation can be carried out on a small scale. This was when Uganda was in the midst of a drought. In the still image, president Museveni with his

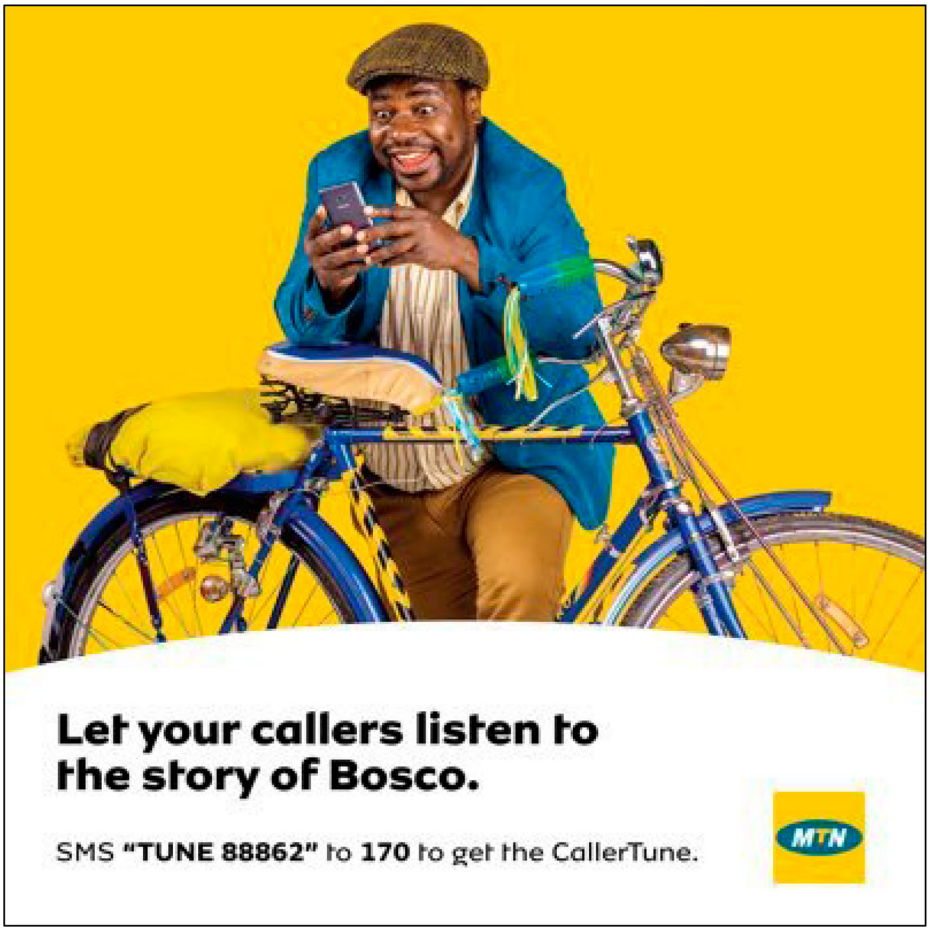

Figure 1. MTN Uganda's advertising text picked from its official Facebook page (© MTN Uganda, Kampala).

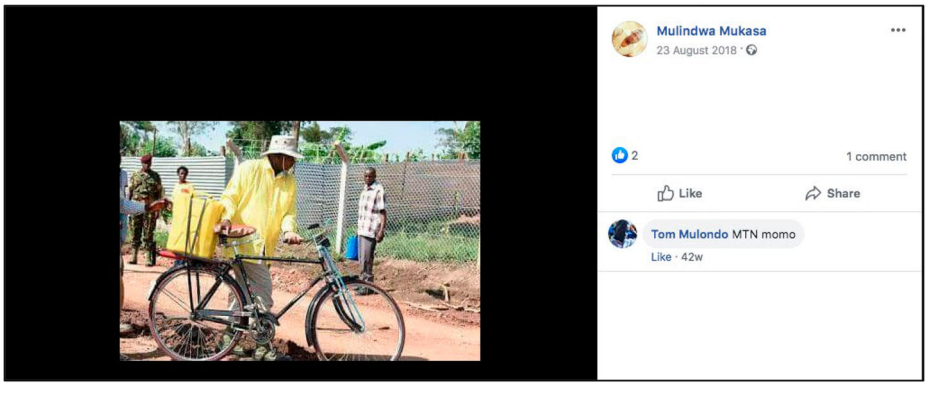

Figure 2. Mulindwa Mukasa, Facebook post (photograph provided by Presidential Press Unit, Uganda).

unmistakable hat is seen pushing a bicycle with a 20-litre jerrycan full of water mounted on the backseat. Hard to miss is the president's yellow shirt. Equally hard to miss is the fact that the person that posted the photo on Facebook did not caption it. The first comment the Facebook post, however, attracted was "MTN momo", which was the name of the campaign the 'Bosco' TV advert sought to popularise. Momo is short form for mobile money.

Figure 3 is a screen grab from Facebook that captures the status update of one of Uganda's 16.7 million Internet users. The Facebook post is basically a montage of still images that all have president Museveni either with or on a bicycle. A paradigmical choice is also made by the author of the post to repurpose lyrics from the Bosco TV advert. President Museveni therefore becomes a part of the paradigm of the advert and vice versa. The irrelevance and immediacy of president Museveni is transferred to the advert and consequently becomes part of our overall reading of its materiality and the statement that it makes. It is said that signs do not portray meaning; that they

Figure 3. Herman Nnyanzi, Facebook post (photographs provided by Presidential Press Unit, Uganda).

instead offer ideologies, worldviews and lifestyles. The lifestyle cobbled together by this associative link is of someone, much like Bosco, that is out of touch. All of this takes place in spite of Museveni trying to come up with a show of strength akin to what Chuck Norris mustered in his blockbuster movies. The author evidently intends for the 'BOSCO … *Eggaali agivuga naga* Chuck Norris' (Luganda for [Museveni] rides a bicycle as Chuck Norris would) line to express contempt or disapproval.

Figure 4 is another screen grab from Facebook. In it, president Museveni is captured putting the final touches on a makeshift drip drop irrigation system. A classic syntagm is created here with non-linear combinations that are in many respects governed by conventions. The Facebook user in this particular case makes the individual choice to substitute one sign (the bicycle) for another (the makeshift drip drop irrigation system) in the same set. This metaphoric substitution, consummated by repurposing lyrics of the Bosco advert's music bed (along with the line 'Bosco's life was mathematical, then it became very magical' from the advert, the author adds his own line: '*Ennimiro agirima nga Chuck Norris* – Luganda for 'He ploughs his garden like Chuck Norris'), yields a sarcastic outcome. It achieves this by successfully imbuing an advert MTN Uganda sanctioned with properties the latter is not comfortable being associated with. Just as life becomes very magical after using MTN's mobile money service, ditto the farmer who uses a makeshift drip drop irrigation system. To cover a lot of ground in

Figure 4. Herman Nnyanzi, Facebook post (photograph provided by Presidential Press Unit, Uganda).

a garden spanning several hectares, the farmer has to display the overwhelming power Chuck Norris showed in his action-packed movies. Or better yet, the farmer has to have the kind of stranglehold Museveni has on Ugandan politics.

In Figure 5, the definite article 'the' is used in the signified (meaning) of the sign. In visual terms, an action is always required whenever the article 'the' is used. The audience is compelled to identify the object being referenced from the same shared mental set. So in essence the article 'the' has a structural relationship with the signifier. Figure 5 is a Facebook post in which the author uses MTN Uganda's still image and his own text to create a symbol/index/icon triad. The text (in Luganda, which is a widely used local language) can loosely be translated to mean: 'Bosco is not about to leave his seat of power'. The author is obviously employing the use of the signifier bearing symbolic, indexical and iconic characteristics. This non-linear combination suggests that the signifier being referred to is president Museveni who since taking over the reins of power in 1986 is not about to leave his seat of power. The seat of power, which in this case is a symbol in the form of a sign, is conventionally used as well as given meaning by way of an identifiable habit.

But also the noun *entebbe* (Luganda for chair) has always had political undertones in Uganda thanks in no small part to the fifth president of the East African nation from 1979

Figure 5. Keneth (sic) Nuwamanya, Facebook post (photograph provided by MTN Uganda).

to 1980, Godfrey Binaisa. During his 11-month spell as president of Uganda, Binaisa is reported to have given away a number of quotable one-liners. None, however, stood the test of time like '*entebbe ewooma*' (Luganda for 'the seat of power is sweet').[59] The sweets of office therefore explain why most African leaders overstay their welcome. This symbolic meaning could be attributed to Figure 5 given Bosco's posture in *entebbe* and his thumbs up for good measure. It is worth noting that the thumbs up is one of the political symbols attributable to president Museveni's political party, National Resistance Movement or NRM.

In Figure 6, we see that it was not just the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the alienated subject destroyed in the wake of the torrent of memes. The main text in Figure 6 alludes to what happened in the wake of the misrecognition of the Bosco TV advert. The advert was unceremoniously pulled and the chief executive of MTN Uganda, a non-Ugandan, deported under a cloud of mystery. MTN Uganda rubber-stamped another TV advert to popularise their Internet services. The advert was fronted by a character – Dismas – who was tailored to be the antithesis of Bosco, and by extension president Museveni. What we, however, see in Figure 6's shared message is a parallel being drawn between president Museveni and Dismas. What we essentially get to witness in the Dismas TV advert is Dismas attempting to use a virtual assistant to score points with a lady who, much like him, is held up at a bus stop. Not in the least impressed, if anything exasperated, the lady asks the virtual assistant: 'How can I

Figure 6. Isaac (#FreeUganda), Facebook post (photograph provided by Presidential Press Unit, Uganda).

Figure 7. Social media meme created by unknown person.

chase away this man?' In Figure 6 and indeed Figure 7, we see president Museveni getting at the wrong end of the question. In Figure 7, we see president Museveni's head superimposed on Dismas's body. The fatigue of those that want Uganda's strongman out of office is very apparent. We see lines from the Dismas advert recalibrated to illuminate this fatigue in form of a classic signification.

Plugging the gaps

Social networking platforms play a telling role in shaping the conversations of a number of Ugandans. This paper has provided evidence that points to online spaces amplifying Ugandans' voices and lived experiences in ways that legacy media still struggle with. Such has been the growth of the technology ecosystem that Ugandans have watched what they have put in the bloodstream of the Internet blossom. While most of this content has largely been for public consumption and titillation, such a status quo does not undercut the fact that a space to publicly challenge and even contradict dominant patterns has been made available. This has been the case despite the increasingly elaborate growth of online monitoring and censorship.

This paper synthesises two bodies of work that rarely comment on one another: the pure semiosis of intertextuality and discourse analysis's version. The decision to try and interpose the two is informed by the deficit Matheson picks out in a poststructuralist thinking that essentially 'identif[ies] a narrower range of intertexts based on arguments about the social function of the text.'[60] Matheson offers a pragmatic solution where in attempting to discover what possible meanings of a text are relevant, we put ourselves in the shoes of the author and intended target of the text. He also counsels that we interest

ourselves in the echo of the advertising text. This paper does all of this and ends up creating a duality with great efficacy.

This paper, while well aware that semiotics continue to be a popular instrument in cultural studies when it comes to studying advertising texts, is not in doubt that the qualitative method could do with theories of the social. It therefore does whatever it can to interest itself in the social life of the sign of the advertising text under study. The purpose of this undertaking is to make sense of the impact on the intertexts by not just the social struggle but also media culture. For instance, issues ranging from preference falsification (lying about one's likes thanks to various pressures) to algorithms (that filter out content on social networks on account of history and preferences) impact on this study's findings probably for worse more than better.

As I have argued in this paper, humour is a noteworthy heuristic tool that has evidently facilitated Ugandans to project their shared beliefs and values. The findings of this study indicate that memes deployed largely served subversive purposes to detract greatly from president Museveni's prolonged stay in power. Subversion though is not always the outcome of memes. It is helpful to acknowledge that memes are based on incongruity and people react to incongruity in strikingly different ways. Tella for instance discovered that memes that integrated appropriation of visual and verbal texts were either used to support or ridicule candidates in the 2015 Nigerian presidential election.[61] Such fluidity validates van Dijk's sociocognitive model which proffers the twin strategies of positive "in-group" description and negative "out-group" description.[62] While the "in-group" description did not quite move to reconcile criticism with solidarity in Uganda, Museveni surprised many by embracing the "Bosco" nickname. In participating in the nickname's appropriation, Museveni is believed to have succeeded in emptying it of its subversive value. Empirical evidence to support this conclusion is patchy at best, but anecdotal evidence does suggest that that the "subaltern" political opinion of memes from the Bosco advert humanised Museveni's political power.

While all this means that a tone of finality is ill advised, the pattern that emerges from my study is unmistakable. Online spaces have amplified voices in Uganda that would otherwise be unheard. The advert which Ugandans used to get agency over their stories is an advert like any other. With no clear-cut senders in mind, it was undoubtedly tailored for large audiences to make sense of rather than bite-sized groups. This provided a position for Ugandans to locate themselves, and not just within the so-called consumer culture.

Conclusion

Despite social media remaining a relatively niche product in African countries like Uganda, there is broad consensus that the space is hardly as benign as leaders on the continent once thought it to be. Starkly different from the legacy media that have gained notoriety for routinely unseeing the 'other', online spaces have amplified voices that once were mute. This has largely been made possible by the fact that users of these spaces coalesce around malleable communities of interest. This not only gives the users in question a sense of belonging but also agency over their stories.

Such an intersection of politics and technology has not gone unnoticed by African governments. Regulation of online spaces is almost inconceivable in its scope. The

spike of such regulations in both their frequency and ferocity has, however, not distracted from the popularity of digital spaces. In Uganda, the president signed into law the Computer Misuse Act in 2010. The legislation precludes Internet users from disrupting 'the peace, quiet or privacy of any person with no purpose of legitimate communication'.[63] As Kirenga[64] notes, the legislation persists in its urging of a conduct that does not make cyberspace a breeding ground for people who wish to harass others. It in fact shares tropes with Kenya's Cyber Crimes Act, which, as Nyabola observes, 'has focused on the threat of hacking or cyberterrorism, and the bloggers pose to politicians rather than the obligation to protect the privacy of Kenyans online.'[65]

It is also worth noting that the Ugandan government has moved to police humour. The Ugandan comedy scene largely had free rein from 2007 when the Uganda Communications Commission revoked the Stage Plays and Public Entertainment Act. In 2020, draft regulations that require comedians to obtain a licence, sign a code of ethics and have their scripts approved by a committee in advance were brought in. Yet despite such draconian legislation creating a hostile environment, digital spaces have continued to position themselves as a networked public sphere that teems with locally-driven counternarratives triggered by both rumour and humour. It is this subject matter that for the most part has been the primal focus of this paper. What we have essentially seen with the digital spaces is a subtle negotiation around power. This in a sense is a refreshing departure from the legacy media which have carved a reputation for flattening or ignoring altogether that which is seen as a threat to tradition.

Much like any other reaction to a disruptor, the move by new spaces to wrest considerable power out of the grip of legacy media has been met with resistance. And this has not only taken the shape of draconian pieces of legislation but also aggressive online campaigns. Kitatta[66] for instance lifts the lid on flirtations by the Ugandan government with stealth public relations campaigns to rehabilitate president Museveni's image on digital spaces. This would involve doling out money on superusers and bots on Twitter as well as Facebook. The resonance and impact of such efforts to detoxify the president's image, which gained in traction leading up to the 2021 General Elections, is something that future research could possibly interrogate.

Notes

1. In a sentence, words – which serve as signs – are principally arranged into a syntagmic sequence. Each sign speaks to the sign before and after it, creating a syntagmic relation. The same syntagmic relation is replicated in visual terms with units of a collective speaking to each other. Taken together, this collection of signs (signification) – both textual and visual – helps form value (meaning).
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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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