Potentially Harmful Hidden Meanings in Kenyan Television Commercials: A semiotic analysis of Safaricom’s Shangwe Mtaani promotion

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Background to the study

• Safaricom launched a 60-day promotion dubbed 'Shangwe Mtaani' to mark its 15th anniversary at the end of October 2015.
• To subscribe, customers were send their names and receive codes, after which they were to answer questions at the cost of Sh5 per text message.
• A petitioner took issue with the commercial, claiming that the promotion was ‘Balkanising’ the country.
• Mr Peter Solomon Gichira, filed a petition before the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), saying the lottery implied that certain regions of the country belonged to given groups only
Justification

- Many studies on Kenyan media have always looked at the functional perspective of the media, leaving out critical and perspectives.

- Besides, existing studies have always targeted media’s relations with the government or information and entertainment programmes or media policies, but not advertisements.


- This is despite the fact that all commercial media content is supported by the advertising industry.
Justification cont’d

• Advertisements are not only critically vital in TV broadcasting but they are also what television viewers watch most (Turow 2010).

• Advertisements not only sell goods and services; they also sell lifestyles and tastes (Williamson 1978).

• Advertisers try to circulate narratives that resonate with beliefs and practices of the societies of their audiences (Goffman 1979).
Why ads should worry Viewers

• “Advertising is the most powerful and sustained system of propaganda in human history and its cumulative cultural effects, unless quickly checked, will be responsible for destroying the world, as we know it.” (Sut Jhally 2009)
Methodology - Semiotics

This paper takes a semiotic approach in analysing a media text, i.e. Safaricom’s *Shangwe Mtaani* promotion.

Semiotics is the discipline that studies signs and their functions in the society (Bignell 2002)

The founding of semiotics as a field of study is associated with two scholars: French Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce in the early 20th century.
Semiotics cont’d

- In semiotics every phenomenon can create two levels of meanings: Denotation (obvious) and connotation (hidden).
- In advertising **denotation** is the narrative that every viewer can easily recognise.
- **Connotation** is the hidden narrative that comes out when the viewer engages the text critically.
- **Myth** (a third level of meaning) is the negative things that look harmless on the surface.
Shangwe Mtaani
In this commercial Safaricom is promising rewards for its subscribers, who stand to win millions of shillings by just sending their names on text messages.

At first there is confusion as each region of the eight provinces of Kenya wants to be the winner.

An arbitrator clarifies that each province will have its own winner.
Connotations

• Inhabitants of the Rift Valley are Kalenjin and they are known for their athletics.
• Eastern Province belong to the Kamba people.
• Nyanza belongs to the Luo (and maybe) the Kisii.
• North Eastern has been excluded for too long but now they are “included.”
• Coast people are considering “joining” Kenya.
Myths

• The narratives in this commercial look natural because they have been emptied of their historical perspectives (Barthes, 1957).

• There may be nothing wrong to say that “Coast is part of Kenya” but when you bring in the historical context it becomes a potentially dangerous statement.

• Ethnic accents sound natural as a marker of Kenyans’ Cultural identity/diversity but in time of disagreement they are a source of chaos.
Conclusion

• Advertisements are a vital component of the mass media; they are the main source of income for commercial media.

• They also help to sell goods and services, giving viewers important information and income to the media industry.

• They however carry hidden messages that promote vices like greed, ethnicity and dishonesty.
Conclusion cont’d

• *Shangwe Mtaani* promotion potentially promotes greed. People are encouraged to win a million shillings without working hard; just sending a text message.

• The promotion evokes bitter memories of ethnic tensions in Kenya by statements like “*Pwani ni Kenya*” (Coast is part of Kenya).

• Many Kenyans can recall the blood letting at the coast following the “*Pwani si Kenya*” (Coast is not part of Kenya) rallying call.
The promotion is clearly zoning Kenya into ethnic regions; a traumatizing message for the ethnic communities residing in areas whose language they don’t speak.

Nyanza, for instance, in inhabited by the Luo, Kisii, Kuria, Luhya and many other communities from allover the country, and people of Asian and European descent. But the promotion suggests that only the Luo and (on a second thought) the “Kisii Nyanza” people belong to the province.

The (hidden) message in this promotion is potentially dangerous, especially looked at with the 2007/8 post-election violence backdrop.
Recommendations

• We cannot stop advertisements; they give us free TV and radio as well as subsidised newspapers and magazines.
• We cannot stop people from watching television commercials and promotions; that means skipping television altogether.
• We only need to empower people with media literacy skills to enable them see through the negative hidden messages, whose aim is to promote consumer capitalism, where profits come above anything else.
• People need to know that the main objective of ALL television content is to draw in viewers in order to make money (Jhally, 2009).
• This is what the advertising industry dictates television to do.
• In order to understand media content in general and television in particular, viewers need capacity to understand the advertising industry and the psychology involved in creating adverts.
• The solution is media literacy.
Thank you