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Image-centrism in Africa's political communication: a social semiotic analysis of self-presentation practices by women political candidates in Kenya's social media space

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ABSTRACT

This study explores self-visual presentation practices by female political candidates on Facebook during Kenya's political campaigns that culminated in the national elections of 2022. The unit of analysis is the Facebook profile image of the women leaders. Image-centrism is operationalized as the extent to which 'the image' becomes the primary mode of self-presentation in political communication discourse. The study adopts a social semiotic approach to image interpretation postulated by Roland Barthes (1972. Mythologies. (A. Lavers. Trans) (Original work published 1957), 1977. Rhetoric of the image. In *Image, music, text* (pp. 32–51). Hill and Wang) and Kress and van Leeuwen (1996. *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge, 2006. *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge). Using Kress and van Leeuwen's approach, images are studied as 'linguistic codes' that have their own 'grammatical' structure. Barthes's approach explores the cultural dimension of the images. The argument here is that visual communication is context-bound, and the theoretical premise laid is that politics is given direction, shape, and impetus by the culture of a people. In order to understand visual political communication in Kenya, therefore, the study analyses and interprets images from the lens of the wider African cultural contexts within which this communication takes place. The overarching questions in this study include:

a) How did female politicians in Kenya strategically use Facebook images for self-representation during the political campaigns in 2022?
b) How have women politicians in Kenya interwoven cultural ideology with visual political communication on their Facebook pages?

The ultimate conclusion is that political images not only serve as discourses for communicating political ideas and making political statements, but they also serve as self-representation modes as well as cultural manifestation codes that illuminate specific societal concepts.

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Introduction

This study examines the utilization of Facebook profile photos as tools of political campaigns by female politicians in Kenya during the national elections of 2022. A total of seven profile photos were randomly selected for study, comprising half the total number of images belonging to women politicians who vied for gubernatorial posts in Kenya in 2022. The images were considered as campaign tools because they were set up as Facebook profiles in 2022 when the campaign period in Kenya was officially launched.[1] Given that political communication is a strategic process, and individuals have varying options to choose from when opting for images to use for political communication purposes, it was imperative to investigate how the selected images were constructed to amplify the chances of women politicians gaining political leverage in 2022.

The rationale behind prioritizing Facebook as a central platform for investigation was underpinned by multiple factors. Firstly, it is the most widely used social media platform for political communication in Kenya, as reported by Kipkoech (2023) and Wamuyu (2020). Moreover, the Communications Authority of Kenya (CAK) (2020) notes that Facebook has a large demographic base among the Kenyan population. This diversity suggests a nuanced impact of the platform across different groups, making it an ideal platform for political representation. The selection of Kenya as a focal point for this study was pegged on the fact that it is the most digitally advanced country in Sub-Saharan Africa, where social media platforms are an integral part of daily life, indicating a thriving online community (Kipkoech, 2023; Nyabola, 2018; Ogola & Cheruiyot, 2022).

For women politicians who are often misrepresented in a political context that is highly patriarchal and undemocratic such as in Kenya, social media platforms provide opportunities for them to sidestep the institutional, structural, and political barriers that often face them in political communication, and craft their online image without relying on traditional gatekeepers (Evans & Clarke, 2016). Based on these factors, it was deemed important to examine how women politicians used Facebook to construct their own identities, control their visual political narrative, and design their self-presentation modes to the Kenyan public.

The study employs the theory of social semiotics postulated by Barthes (1957/1972, 1977) and Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) to analyze the selected images. Semiotics refers to the study of signs and their associated signifying elements (Barthes, 1977). It involves uncovering various layers of meaning in signs by analyzing their denotations and connotations (Van Leeuwen, 2001). Signs manifest as visual representations, physical entities, or linguistic constructs that embody alternative meanings (Harrison, 2003). Within the context of this study, signs are stipulated as Facebook profile photos of women politicians in Kenya, herein denoted as social media images, inclusive of all the signifying elements such as captions.

The tenets of social semiotics, as expounded by Aiello (2006, p. 5), advocate for the inclusion of 'the social' within the semiotics schema. This suggests that the interpretation of images is intricately linked to their social contexts as postulated by Onuora (2021). These social factors encompass the beliefs, concepts, perspectives, and emotions of a society (Gontier et al., 2022). It is within the purview of this conceptual paradigm that this study explores the semiotic dimensions inherent in the social media images of women politicians, situating the analysis within the realms of both Kenyan

and broader African contexts. The central objective is to unravel the intricate ways in which cultural narratives are conveyed through the social media images under study, elucidate the interpretative dimensions encapsulated by the selected visuals in relation to the constructs of 'Africanness' and 'Kenyanness,' and ultimately advance a more comprehensive understanding of visual political communication dynamics within the African milieu.

The preceding contextualization underscores the pivotal role of context in shaping effects, a premise substantiated by (Salgado, 2019). Nonetheless, scholars continuously decry the prevailing Western-centric viewpoint from which political communication scholarship in Africa is investigated (see Omotoso, 2013, 2021; Wasserman, 2019; Olukotun & Omotoso, 2017; Karam & Mutsvairo, 2021; Onuora, 2021; Karam, 2018; Ngomba, 2012; Mare, 2018). To attain a more nuanced comprehension of political communication in Africa, a more comprehensive approach is imperative, one that integrates African perspectives and interpretations.

But while recognizing the significance of cultural context in Africa's political communication, it is crucial to acknowledge Africa's diversity, and that the interpretation of meaning may differ significantly based on the region and social-cultural variations within the continent. Thus, the projections outlined within this paper are broad generalizations that cut across different cultural practices among other African communities. The study serves to highlight that images used by women politicians in Kenya for their political campaigns do not produce isolated meanings in Africa's political communication space and practice. Rather, these meanings are part of the larger discourses within which the Kenyan culture and the broader African cultures are entangled.

Literature

Image, culture, and politics

Visual images are powerful symbols that shape social realities and are closely linked to a culture's communication process. Yang et al. (2017) argue that images reflect social norms, while Stasiulis (2020) suggests that cultures are expressed through visual presentations. Aiello and Parry (2019) contend that images are cultural artifacts and emphasize that they are shaped by the social context and discourse in which they are created and shared. Essentially, the underlying argument is that images serve as important visual markers of a society's beliefs, values, and traditions.

In contemporary political communication scholarship, the importance of images and their centrality has been a topic of interest. Experts in contemporary politics, including Aiello and Parry (2019), Lilleker (2020), Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017), Geise et al. (2021), Farkas et al. (2022), and Parry (2023), highlight the significant role that visuals play in modern politics and visual culture. Political leaders utilize the power of imagery to shape a specific image around their candidacy, as noted by Farkas and Bene (2020). Through visuals, these leaders build personas that convey traits such as authenticity, likability, approachability, patriotism, and accessibility. Political imagery not only serves as a critical communication tool for politicians but also enables citizens to understand a politician's unique character, leadership abilities, and overall candidacy premise (Lilleker & Liefbroer, 2018).

The prominence of images in political communication can be attributed to various factors. Firstly, images have a powerful impact on people. For instance, political candidates can easily project their desired image to a visually inclined audience. This visual inclination is supported by Lilleker et al. (2019) who assert that 'human culture is visual culture' (p. 1). Politicians therefore tap into this societal trait by using images as strategic communication modes. Secondly, individuals are heavily reliant on images to recount their day-to-day activities, making them more likely to resonate with visual content. Additionally, due to technological advancements, there is a new generation of individuals who have a significant affiliation with information that is easy to process. Lilleker (2019) refers to this generation as a new technological species that has devised a coping mechanism for dealing with information overload by seeking cognitive shortcuts. In this regard, images serve as effective communication tools that help individuals to process information with ease.

While the significance of images in global political rhetoric is undeniable, there exists a scarcity of empirical studies delving into the place of images in Africa's political communication scholarly pursuits. Noteworthy studies in this domain include investigations done by Mensah et al. (2023) and Narteh et al. (2017), who have scrutinized the utilization of visuals in Ghana's political campaign discourse. In a related vein, Osiebe (2020) has ventured into the exploration of dress and apparel as visual tools addressing governance and legislative issues in Nigeria and South Africa. Diversifying the discourse, Adejunmobi and Olaniyan (2022) have examined the intersectionality of popular culture, politics, and performance in Nigeria, while Uguanyi et al. (2019) have probed into the role of visual communication in the political expression of Nigerian citizens. In this study, I delve into the intersectionality of gender, culture, and visual political expression within the Kenyan context, while borrowing literature from the wider African scholarship. Here, I hope to contribute to the discourse of visual political communication, not just in Kenya but in the wider African continent.

The scarcity of empirical research that focuses on the role of visuals in Africa's political communication is surprising, especially when considering the historical and cultural eminence of images in many African societies. Predating the advent of writing, images functioned as the primary modes of communication throughout Africa. Remnants of ancient image-based communication systems are scattered all over the continent (Onuora, 2021). It is these ancient African communication systems that became precursors to modern-day writings (Onuora, 2021, p. 25; Hoffmann, 2002).

In contemporary Africa, the deployment of images, symbols, and visual elements is pivotal to the communication process. As asserted by Katende (2014), visuals constitute the fundamental basis for communication across the entire continent. Onuora (2021) accentuates that images function as the predominant language system in Africa, wielding a crucial role in enhancing communication efficacy. The pervasive utilization of visuals in Africa's political communication finds its rationale in the capacity of images to simplify complex political matters, especially within communities and regions with low literacy levels (Wasserman, 2019 and Mensah et al., 2023). Generally, however, in contemporary society, conventional modes of visual political communication harmonize with digital technologies, enhancing the amplification of messages and broadening communication prospects within the African context (Chiumbu, 2015; Wasserman, 2019), a subject discussed in the ensuing section.

The use of images for self-presentation in digital politics

As elucidated in the preceding sections of this study, there is a palpable surge in the recognition of the role played by visual communication in the realm of politics. In tandem with the prevailing trajectory toward digital communication, political actors have redirected their focus to online platforms as central domains for political engagements (Farkas & Bene, 2020; Lewis et al., 2019; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017). Utilizing personal images, political figures not only endeavour to construct intricate political narratives (Widjayanto et al., 2022), but also deliberately shape their identity through the strategic deployment of self-presentation techniques (Nazmine et al., 2022; Steffan, 2020).

For women politicians, digital platforms like social media are significant self-presentation avenues for several reasons. Firstly, according to Ndavula et al. (2015), there is a general sidelining of women politicians by traditional media and a tendency to portray them in negative stereotypical ways (see Mattan & Small, 2021; Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). According to Everitt et al. (2016) and Lemarier-Saulnier and Thierry (2019), this underrepresentation and misrepresentation affect how the electorate perceives, understands, and evaluates women politicians, consequently affecting their political standing. Social media platforms offer a space for these women leaders to present themselves and their messages independently, without relying on traditional gatekeepers to represent them.

Secondly, there are a significant number of political cultures in the globe that are structured in a manner that favours male politicians against female politicians (see Bosch et al., 2020; Cardo, 2021; Karpf, 2012; Bett & Ngala-Dimba, 2020). In such political environments, women politicians have to make strategic decisions about their public image. Social media provide opportunities for women politicians to promote their political power play (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018). Additionally, because of their user-generated content, they have become a popular choice and alternative for women politicians to create and manage their own identities (Sazali & Basit, 2020).

Scholarly investigations into the online self-presentation strategies of female politicians underscore a prevalent tendency where these politicians strategically leverage stereotypes to bolster their own image while mitigating negative associations. Conversely, there are politicians who consciously embrace and perpetuate established stereotypes, aligning their public persona with prevalent societal norms and expectations (Cardo, 2020; Schneider, 2014a, 2014b). Furthermore, a distinct group of women politicians intentionally challenge ingrained societal stereotypes by adopting unconventional self-presentation methods, such as incorporating masculine traits to assert their gender identity. Schneider (2014b) labels this specific approach as a 'bending strategy' (p 57).

Regarding specific visual strategies in online presentations, Brands et al. (2021) posit that there are numerous ways in which political leaders present themselves. These presentation modes range from opting for certain camera angles to wearing specific colours of apparel. Scholars such as Van der Pas and Aaldering (2020), Pedersen (2018) and Lee and Lim (2018) have investigated how women politicians self-present using dress codes. Van der Pus and Aaldering (ibid) conclude that women are often judged on their attire especially when it is informal. On the other hand, Flicker (2013) regards formal dress for women politicians as a reinforcement of masculine political behaviour. This debate over feminine and masculine self-presentation modes has been projected to other areas of self-

presentation such as the use of facial cues (see Carpinella and Bauer, 2021), and camera angles (see Ekman & Widholm, 2017). For instance, male politicians who are portrayed with serious and distance facial cues have been said to be enhancing their authority and leadership traits while women politicians who use the same approach have been labelled as unfeminine (see Verser & Wicks, 2006). Ultimately, it appears that women politicians are constantly critiqued for their self-presentation tactics, with no clear standard of what is considered appropriate for them (Flicker, 2013).

Method

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the strategic utilization of social media images by women politicians in Kenya, delving into the nuanced entanglement of cultural ideology with this facet of political communication. The study specifically examined the Facebook profile photos of seven randomly selected women political candidates vying for gubernatorial positions in Kenya during the national elections of August 2022.

In total, there were twenty three women politicians who were on the ballot for gubernatorial positions in Kenya. Out of these, twenty two of them had Facebook pages but only nineteen were public. The three private pages were eliminated from the study. Among the nineteen, four of them did not have profile photos, while one had a profile photo whose textual component was Dholuo.[2] These 5 women were also eliminated from the study. Out of the fourteen women that remained, half of them were randomly selected for the study, achieving a fifty percent sample size.

The researcher used web capture to obtain six Facebook profile photos of the selected women between the 15th and 20th of June 2022. Specifically, the profile photos were obtained by way of screenshots, using the computer's in-built operating system. These photos were then stored in Microsoft Word (MS) for further analysis. Profile photos were harvested during the aforementioned dates because it was assumed that by that time, politicians had time to upload the images for the campaign period that officially began on May 29th, 2022 (IEBC[3], 2022). An additional profile photo was randomly selected and uploaded in the same manner as the previous ones on June 28th, 2023, making a total of 7 profile photos. Although it was no longer an active profile photo, Facebook affordances allowed the researcher to retrieve it. A social semiotic analysis was then conducted on these profile photos using Barthes's works of (1957/1972, 1977) and Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2006) semiotic approaches to image analysis. Although the image was the primary focus of analysis, textual features completed the analysis, a practice that is recommended by Barthe, Kress, and van Leeuwen, and which is explained in the semiotics section below.

Analysis

Semiotics in image analysis

Reiterating the aforementioned discourse, this study utilizes Roland Barthes's theory of sign Interpretation and Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design, which are part of the semiotics framework for image analysis. Semiotics provides a way to

comprehend the multiple layers of meaning that exist in visual communication (Danesi, 2007), and social semiotics is its subset that examines how signs contribute to meaning construction in society (Aiello, 2006). Both of these approaches to image analysis were used in this study because they complement each other. While Kress and van Leeuwen's method explains the structure and syntax of images, Barthe's approach goes a step further, providing a contextual (cultural) explanation that enables meaning formation.

Roland Barthe's theory of interpretation of signs

Within the construct of Barthes's theory of sign interpretation, multiple contentions are presented across various frameworks, all of which are referenced in this study. Notably, in his examination of the Rhetoric of the Image (1977), Barthes contends that the explication of visual signification transpires through three meta-levels namely the linguistic level, nod-coded iconic (denotative) level, and the coded iconic (connotative) level (p. 152–154).

At the linguistics level, Barthes posits that signs (images) are rarely presented in their pure and natural state, and that they are a sum of various elements including linguistic components. These components, which are inserted into the natural disposition of the sign are to be considered part of the sign because they are used to illustrate it (Hood & Glaveanu, 2013). Linguistic components include the title, descriptions, and captions, among others. Borrowing from Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), Stoian (2015) refers to the linguistic elements as 'narrative structures' (p. 25) which if left out of the sign, may alter its meaning.

Secondly, Barthes introduces the non-coded iconic level, or denotative level, into the study of signs. Here, the meaning of a sign is fixed, and the components are explained exactly as they are seen, without digging deep into the underlying meaning. Lastly, there is the coded iconic level, also known as the connotative level of meaning. This level includes the ideological concepts that are attached to the sign (Chandler, 2002), the social practices and social representations projected by the sign, or even the cultural disposition projected by the sign (Fiske, 1990). Unlike the denotative level, the connotative level is open to interpretative engagement. According to Barthes (1982), this connotative level of meaning has no meaning except that which a culture gives (p. 102).

The approach given by Barthes is significant for this study because Barthes recognizes that linguistic elements in an image should be considered as part of the image. Also, Barthes argues that the reading and interpretation of signs must be situated within social and cultural contexts. Because this study investigates the meaning of social media images from the perspective of the Kenyan and the larger African culture, and because textual elements are also analyzed as central elements in image interpretation, Barthes' semiotics theory is relevant.

But while Barthes's theoretical framework underscores the cultural and social dimensions that are pivotal in the interpretation of symbols, it is conspicuously devoid of a methodical and structured analysis of the grammar and syntax that is inherent in visual elements. Because of this deficiency, I introduced Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design as a complementary lens. Kress and van Leeuwen's theory enabled a systematic deconstruction of the visual grammar within images, encompassing elements of representation, composition, and framing. The integration of these dual theoretical

perspectives yielded a more nuanced and comprehensive grasp of the semiotic strategies evident in visual representations.

Kress and van Leeuwen grammar of visual design

Kress and Leeuwen (1996, 2006) provide an insightful analytical framework for image analysis, which divides meaning construction into three categories namely: representational, interpersonal, and compositional meta-functions. The representational meta function seeks to answer the question of what the image is about, while the interpersonal meta function focuses on how the image engages the reader. The compositional function delves into how the representational and interpersonal meta-functions interact and integrate to form a coherent and meaningful whole (Harrison, 2003). In the table below, I provide a comprehensive breakdown of Kress and Leeuwen's Semiotic analysis of images, which also informs my examination of the profile photos Table 1.

In the analysis, presentation, and discussion of each campaign poster, I have employed the meta-functions of image analyses postulated by Barthes and Van Leeuwen, which are described above. These meta-functions are applied interchangeably. Firstly, I focus on the non-coded iconic level by presenting the basic elements of the image. This involves highlighting what the image depicts, on a literal level. Next, I delve into the image's 'grammar,' which includes the placement of elements, saliency, accompanying text, colour usage, image cohesion, focus, foregrounding, overlapping, and other features. Additionally, I examine the accompanying text and analyze both its denotative and connotative meanings. Finally, I conclude with a highlight of the coded-iconic level of analysis, also known as the symbolic level. Here, I provide a collective discussion on the connotative meaning of the image components with an inclination towards the symbolic narratives that emanate from the image, within the context of the Kenyan/African culture Image 1.

Image 1 above represents a smiling face and the upper torso of a female politician with a direct gaze at the camera. The visual elements depicted in this image include the facial expression of the politician, her outfit, the logo of her political party[4], and the linguistic elements that complete the image.

Table 1. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Semiotic Image Analysis.

Meta function	Focus	Details
Representational	What is the picture about?	A description of the people, objects, or places within the image
Interpersonal	How does the image engage the viewer?	- Image act and gaze - Intimacy and distance with the viewer - Perspective of the image
Compositional	How do the representational and interpersonal meta-functions relate to each other and integrate into a meaningful whole.	This is the 'syntax or grammar' of the image. - Placement of elements - How elements are held together or separated within the image - Salience - Use of colour or lack of it - The general organization of the image

Image 1. Aspiring Governor, Kirinyaga County, Kenya.

The image has several vectors. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 59), vectors are elements that impart orientation and direction to the signifier (the total image). The first vector here is the gaze vector where the politician's gaze is directed to the audience. Subsequently, a textual vector is established through the strategic deployment of bold lettering, encompassing the politician's name, political slogan, party affiliation, and the electoral year. Finally, colour assumes the role of a vector, serving to illuminate the image, accentuate facial features, and contribute to the overall branding.

Symbolically, the directionality of the gaze has an interactive meta-function. It serves as a form of demand that invites the viewer to form a social affinity with the referent (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p. 116). Here, gaze may also be used by the politician to project assertiveness and confidence, thereby exerting power and authority. The smile, in this image, serves as a social signifier that symbolically confers emotions such as positivity, approachability, and friendliness.

By boldening and capitalizing texts, the politician confers semantic distinction to these narrative structures and directs the reader's attention to them. This is a symbolic way of communicating the significance and intensity of the text. Lastly, the use of contrasting colours on the various components of the image such as the name, candidacy, year of

elections, and the politician's political slogan foregrounds these elements, compelling the viewer's gaze. Also, by using bright colours, the modality of the image is intensified. Colour, in this image, has also been used for branding purposes. In 2022, yellow and green were the official colours of UDA – the politician's political party. Barthes (1957/1972) argues that colour has ideological implications, that are rooted in cultural symbolism. By using her political party's official colours, this politician is expressing political affiliation and loyalty to her party Image 2.

Denotatively, this image represents two distinct parts. The first is a close-up of a smiling mouth with lips adorned with different shades of lipstick. The second part features a female politician with a friendly expression and folded arms. The accompanying textual signifiers describe the politician's smile, the voting sign, her name, and the position that she is vying for. The bottom of the image states that she is an independent candidate, meaning she is not associated with any political party.

This image lacks foregrounding and overlapping elements, thus lacking in salience. While the politician's name is done in bold, black, capital letters, it is positioned near the bottom of the image, suggesting that it is not the most important aspect of the image. The most salient feature is the politician's smile, which is accompanied by the phrase 'smairo nì tiki' (The smile is perfect!). Although a smile is considered as a signifier

Image 2. Second Aspiring Governor for Kirinyaga County, Kenya.

in social semiotics that represents the emotional stance of the referent, it has been used, in this image, as a vector in the sense that the bold, dark colours surrounding the smiling mouth also draw attention to it. The caption that accompanies this smile (the smile is perfect) consolidates this argument. Symbolically, the voting sign placed next to the smile appears to encourage voters to vote for this politician based solely on her 'perfect' smile Image 3.

This image represents a female politician looking directly at the camera, displaying a relatively serious face and upper torso. The visual elements displayed in the image include the apparel, her name, her political party affiliation[5], a political slogan, her candidacy, the electoral area, and the year that she is running for office.

This image employs three key vectors namely the textual vector, colour, and gaze vectors. Textual vector is employed by using bold, capitalized texts displaying the politician's name and her aspired political position while colour vector is achieved by the placement and combination of the colours. As discussed under image 1 above, the intention behind the use of textual vector is to accentuate the elements highlighted, thus commanding the attention of the viewer. Dark colours have been used here to elevate the modality of the image by enhancing its boldness and depth. And just like in image 1 above, colour vector

Image 3. Aspiring Governor, Busia County, Kenya.

is used as a branding technique. The colours used in this image were the official colours of the politician's political party, ODM.[6] Symbolically, therefore, they have been used to communicate her political affiliation. As far as the gaze is concerned, this image adopts a unique perspective of the eye level, the intensity, and steadiness of the gaze. Perspective is a dimension of the interaction meta-function that symbolically assigns power and creates a relationship between the referent and the viewer (Stoian, 2015). In visual communication, this eye connection creates a powerful effect of establishing a direct line of communication between the viewer and the referent, thus breaking down the barriers that may exist between the two Image 4.

At the denotative level, this image features a politician who is shown from the waist up, smiling and with crossed arms. The visual elements depicted include the apparel (in semiotic terms, vestisign) consisting of eyeglasses, formal attire, and a bracelet painted with the colours of the Kenyan national flag. The image has accompanying text which includes her name, the political position that she is aspiring for, and the electoral area. Also, there are textual elements that depict that she is running as an independent candidate, and two political slogans indicating 'our mother' and 'okolea kaana ka Miirú' which loosely translates to 'vote for the child of Meru.'

Image 4. Aspiring Governor, Meru County, Kenya.

Connotatively, reference to motherhood is a political slogan that depicts a nurturing leadership inclination as explained under the discussion section of this study. It is also a strategic communication mode that speaks to African norms, and it is used by political leaders to appeal to specific demographics by tapping into cultural sentiments that are associated with warmth and trust.

In general, however, this image lacks a clear perspective, depth, directionality, salience, and coherence. It is challenging for the viewer to draw focus to any particular element for a number of reasons. Firstly, the image lacks clear visual cues or actions that may guide the viewer towards a particular element. In spite of the folded arms that should provide directionality in semiotics, the use of this gesture here suggests a state of indeterminacy. Secondly, there is a lack of narrative and conceptual structure in the use of colour, text placement and other compositional elements. Thus, the image does not appear embedded. Additionally, the image's modality, which could have been achieved by the use of markers such as colour saturation, differentiation, depth, and illumination is elusive Image 5.

This photograph depicts a woman politician's upper body. Her apparel includes eyeglasses, an African beaded necklace, and a yellow dress that corresponds to her political party's colour. The textual signifiers in this image encompass her name, her political party and its symbol,[7] as well as her political slogan which reads, 'malezi ya mama ni bora' (a mother's nurturing is the best). The connotative meaning of this slogan is similar

Image 5. Aspiring County, Kilifi County, Kenya.

to the one highlighted in post 4 above and its cultural implication is presented in the discussion section of this study.

This image adopts a side angle, which is an interactive meta-function in social semiotics (Stoian, 2015). This unconventional image perspective deviates from the typical frontal or straight-on perspective. Symbolically, this departure from the norm creates dynamism and uniqueness in visual presentation, encouraging active engagement with the viewer. Side-angled images also play with power dynamics, and they may imply authority (ibid).

Just like in image 1, the use of colours that officially belong to the politician's political party is a strategic semiotic choice that helps the politician reinforce her party affiliation, foster a visual connection with the party's supporters, and align herself with the party's principles Image 6.

In this image, the image of a female politician is presented in traditional apparel that includes her native Gíkúyú [8]outfit with various ornaments such as beaded earrings, a headband, a cowrie shell necklace, and bracelets. She also adorns a flywhisk that waves triumphantly.

This image has two vectors that confer directionality. The vectors include the gesture vector and the gaze vector. By directing her gaze away from the camera, the politician creates a non-transactional relationship between herself and the viewer. This allows her and other image components to become objects of the viewer's contemplation (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p. 119). She also uses the gesture vector by waving a flywhisk

Image 6. Aspiring County, Kiambu County, Kenya.

to guide the viewer's gaze along that trajectory, and consequently shifts the viewer's attention to the textual elements which include the position that she is vying for, her name, the electoral area, the year of elections and her political slogan.

This image has a high modality that is enabled by the following visual cues. Few image compositional elements, few bold colours, a central perspective, textual support, clarity of symbols, and a strong cultural convention[9] (enabled by clear use of cultural artifacts), especially among the Agíkúyú people where she is seeking political support Image 7.

Image 7 depicts a smiling politician looking at the camera. The visual signifiers in this image include the politician's image whose background is a multitude of people. The image also has textual signifiers which include a reference to the people of her electoral area, her political vision, and her political slogan.

The image adopts a vertical structure, with the politician's image placed at the top right while her political vision and slogans are placed at the bottom. In social semiotics, a vertical arrangement of image components creates a hierarchy of importance. The information placed at the top of a sign is considered crucial, while the information at the bottom is more practical (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 186–194). Thus, the inferred message in this image is that the politician intends to have control or commit to the political vision that she aspires for the people of Machakos, her electoral area.

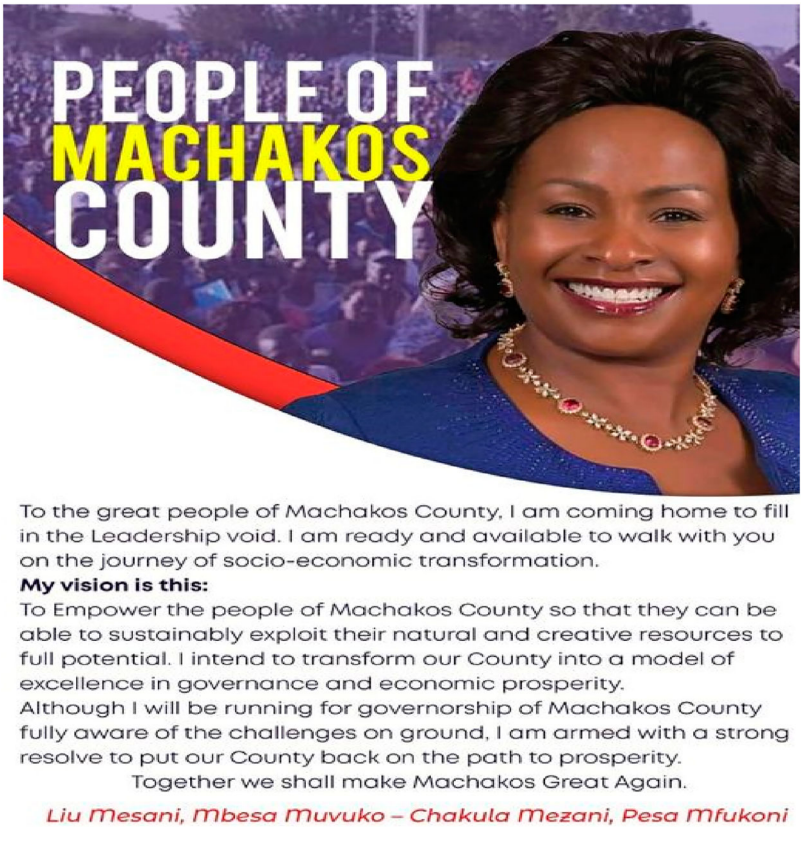

Image 7. Aspiring Governor, Machakos County, Kenya.

Discussion of findings

In the section below, the study examines the semiotic patterns that are observed from the analyzed images. These patterns help in answering the research questions that sought to examine how women politicians in Kenya strategically used Facebook images for self-presentation during the political campaigns in August 2022, and how cultural ideology is interwoven with visual political communication by these leaders on Kenya's social media space. The observable semiotic patterns include the use of apparel as a symbol of political communication, the image act, social distance and point of view, and the salience of image components.

While the focal point of this study revolves around the image, which is the dominant component of this study, the analysis is extended to scrutinize the strategic deployment of textual signifiers that are used to complement and complete the image. In this study, these linguistic elements were important because they substantiated the image. This is in line with Barthes's (1977) argument that it is difficult to encounter an image in its pure state and that images are completed by other elements including texts. This stance is further underscored by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) who posit that images and linguistic signifiers cohere into a meaningful whole (p. 181).

Textual signifiers

The textual signifiers that accompany these images include the names of the politicians, the political slogans, the political parties, the position that the women are aspiring, the year of elections, and their electoral area. All the images, except image 7 have foregrounded their names, their aspired political office, and their political slogans. Some have also foregrounded their political party affiliation and year of elections by presenting them in bold format. As aforementioned in this study, foregrounding of elements confers salience to these elements and communicates that these are the most significant components of the image. According to Barthes (1977), foregrounding of textual signifiers is a form of semantic anchoring where the politician guides the viewer's understanding of her name, candidacy, and slogan, to guide the range of image interpretation and to communicate key ideas that distinguish her from her opponents. This interpretation is guided by the cultural context in which these elements are used (Barthes, 1957/1972).

Notably, among the textual signifiers used in these images, the most domineering one is the political slogan that references motherhood. Over half of the profile photos (4 out of 7) have political slogans that point towards this reference. These slogans include, *mama ni mmoja* (there is only one mother), *Maitù wiitù* (our mother), *malezi ni bora na mama* (nurturing is better with a mother), and in one of the posters, an image of a mother cuddling a baby is shown. In this study, this presentation mode is considered a cultural reference to nurturing, care, and creation (Kioko et al., 2020).

As a practice, motherhood is a cultural norm in Africa that transcends its conventional sphere into the political domain. As a cultural norm, reference to motherhood in politics can either legitimize or delegitimize women leaders (Zigomo, 2022). There are, for instance, scholars who view motherhood in political self-presentation as an attempt for women leaders to align themselves to a patriarchal and masculinist dictate and script

of 'femininity.' (see for instance, Ncube, 2020). Such scholars argue that reference to motherhood in politics is a frame of submissiveness, helplessness, and signs of second-class citizenship. On the other hand, are scholars who celebrate the presentation of a motherhood frame by women leaders. For instance, Acholonu (1995) and Alemayehu (2020) regard reference to motherhood as an ideal representation of African women. To them, motherhood is the Afrocentric alternative to Western feminism.

Not only is the frame of motherhood in Africa's politics a cultural tenet, but it is also a strategic communication approach. This strategy serves as a key to the political survival of women leaders in a cultural context that views communication traits that are motherly, warm, and matronly as qualifiers for a woman's political ability Chuku, 2018). Kioko et al. (2020) support this claim by arguing that motherhood is an African feminist approach to political expression that denotes frames of nurturing, care, oneness with nature, healing, and creation. In such a context, most women politicians are likely to pull the 'mum-card' to woo voters and influence people's opinions.

Apparel as a political and cultural signifier

As highlighted in the review of literature, apparel is a means of political expression. In social semiotics, apparel serves as a signifier, carrying both literal (denotative) and cultural/social (connotative) meanings. They communicate messages about the wearer and their cultural background. While not specifically examining clothing as a cultural symbol, Barthes supports this claim in his seminal 'Mythologies' by arguing how fashion and clothing, along with other aspects of popular culture, can take on symbolic significance in society (Barthes, 1957/1972).

In political communication, apparel helps politicians to express their identity as noted by Behnke (2016). From an Afro-feminist perspective, apparel carries symbolic significance such as the projection of important values, roles, and identities, as well as projecting elements such as gender, social class, and religion among other identities (Oyeniyi, 2016a, p. 106).

In this study, women politicians have adorned various apparel including casual wear, formal wear, traditional clothes, and even ornaments that signify both cultural and national identities. These women have used apparel to symbolize various aspects of Kenya's politics and culture. Out of the seven profile photos analyzed, two have clothes have the official colours of their political parties, five have African cultural ornaments such as neckpieces, headpieces, and earrings among others while one has a bracelet with the colours of Kenya's national flag, symbolizing national identity and pride.

Image six depicts a female politician waving a fly whisk, which is a prime example of deeply embedded symbolism in Africa's political leadership. Okafor (2012) argues that African leaders have been known to utilize special attire, images, and mythical symbols of leadership to convey various political messages. For instance, the fly whisk is used as a symbol of power and authority, and in traditional African symbolism, it was synonymous with possessing superhuman qualities in a leader. In the given image, the woman politician's use of a flywhisk suggests leadership qualities and a premonition of victory in the national elections.

It is fascinating to observe that most of the female politicians are attired in formal 'Western' wear, while only one is adorned in traditional Agìkùyù ethnic garb. This fusion

of African and Western apparel is commonly referred to as 'crisscross' dressing, as elucidated by Fayemini (2021, p. 70). It is imperative to recognize, however, that formal Western wear does not diminish the African identity of these politicians. The African style of dress has evolved over time through borrowing, selecting, discarding, and adapting of various sartorial cultures, as emphasized by Fayemini (ibid). Like any other society, Africa's clothing and fashion have been modified to suit current times. Again, due to colonization and globalization, African practices and ideologies are frequently in competition with Western ideologies for space and relevance. Nonetheless, African social and cultural entities have maintained their fundamental uniqueness, even amidst change and modification.

The image act, social distance, and point of view

Social semiotics posits that images project certain patterns of interaction with the viewer. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) refer to these patterns as the interactive meaning of images. These patterns are categorized under three dimensions which include the image act, the social distance, and the point of view. In this study, the image act is used to refer to the manner in which an image engages the viewer through the gaze and facial expression. The point of view is the angle of the image, which may be vertical or horizontal.

The majority of the images presented in this study depict women politicians looking straight at the viewer. In visual semiotics, eye contact with viewers may be used to achieve psychological closeness, connection, and proximity. It creates a form of address by demanding that the viewer enters into some imaginary reaction with the image. Averting a gaze, like it has been done under image 6, indicates diminished engagement and the image prompts the viewer to meditate on it as a subject of reflection (Harrison, 2003; Stoian, 2015).

The amount and function of gaze varies across cultures, and it is influenced by cultural norms. These culturally specific expectations of how individuals gaze at each other determine how individuals interact with each other. The use of the gaze and its meaning is not clear-cut in African societies. While some societies avoid eye contact as a sign of respect, (see Ntuli, 2012; Nyon, 2021), others embrace the gaze (Agwuele, 2015). The best way to minimize the ambiguity of the gaze is to incorporate a smile, as discussed below.

Closely related to the gaze is a smile. This is because both are facial expressions. Images 1–5 and 7 have women politicians adorning a smile. In social semiotics, a smile is considered as a gesture that establishes psychological warmth between the image and the viewers. It portrays a connection between the referent and the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1966, p. 133). In the field of political communication, the role of a smile is not agreed upon. While some scholars such as Miles (2009) and Centorrino (2015) equate it with positive attributes such as attractiveness and happiness, others like Ross (2016) posit that a smile may reinforce gender stereotypes and undermine women's competence in politics. Gothreau (2020) argues that a smile may be a form of self-objectification that may lead to an appearance-focused form of political representation that prioritizes physical appearance over other skills and abilities.

Psychological distance is also depicted by the angle of the image. All the images under study are close-ups, and women politicians are shown either from the waist up, or only head and shoulders. According to Harrison (2003), this is an interpersonal function of

semiotics that indicates far distance and close personal distance respectively. This form of 'distance' indicates a very close connection between the referent and the viewer. Again, when an image is presented frontally, the intended connection is a close relationship. It implies that the referent is 'one of us' (Harrison, 2003). In African semiotics, this angling and positioning has a symbolic and cultural meaning (Adewumi & Faida, 2017). The head is believed to have a special role in guiding one's destiny and success in many African societies. It is for that reason that in many African artworks, the head is proportionately larger than the rest of the body (Christa, 2006). This African symbolism may be used to explain the reason for politicians opting to show only the upper torso in political communication imagery.

The positioning of image components also has a role in social semiotics. For instance, hand positioning in the analyzed images is an image act that confers directionality in the language of semiotics. Ie, hand position guides the viewer's gaze. However, within the context of Africa, the placement of hands, one on top of the other is a show of humility and respect as done in Images 2–4.

The salience of image components

In social semiotics, salience refers to the ability of the image to capture the attention of the viewer through components such as size, focus, foregrounding, backgrounding of elements, and use of colours among other features (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006).

Approximately ninety percent of the images in this study have foregrounded the name of the politicians and the political position that they are vying for, at the expense of the political slogans and motto. Most of the names and political positions are presented in upper-case, bold letters, symbolically to indicate that these are the most important features of these images. This foregrounding suggests that a politician's name and political position are the most important aspects of communication in political communication. This may be interpreted as a form of personalization of politics, where the focus is on individual politicians at the expense of political parties and institutions (Metz et al., 2020).

Colour is also a semiotic resource that depicts salience. In social semiotics, strong saturated colours have greater salience than soft colours. The profile photos analyzed in this study exhibit a range of hues encompassing green, blue, black, orange, yellow, and brown. These colours heighten the perspective of the images. From a cultural perspective however, these colours have diverse meanings. In Africa for example, black is often associated with masculinity, age, wisdom, and maturity (Robbinson, 2017). Green, which is quite predominant in the continent of Africa, is often considered as the Pan-African colour, symbolizing the unity of the land. Many African flags feature this colour, representing nature, youthfulness, and a prosperous future. On the other hand, yellow is associated with affluence, high status, and visibility, while brown signifies life and earth. These colours have dominated political imagery in this study insinuating messages of hope, vitality, and connection with the environment.

Conclusion

This study has discussed visual communication in Kenya, focusing on the manner in which women politicians visually present themselves on social media. Through a social

semiotic analysis, the study aimed to answer the question of how female politicians in Kenya strategically used social media images for self-representation during the national campaigns of 2022. It has been confirmed that women politicians use various strategies such as the use of apparel as a symbol of communication to pass information about their identity, political affiliation, and personality traits. These women leaders also used textual signifiers on the images to achieve image modality and to highlight the most important aspects of the image. This is also achieved by foregrounding and backgrounding of image elements to create salience on some image features. Lastly, they used image acts and social distance to connect with viewers. Regarding how cultural ideology is interwoven with image communication, the study confirms the flirtation between politics, communication, and culture; and theorizes that political communication in Africa deploys a myriad of visual symbolism to enhance social and emotional appeal to illustrate power and leadership qualities.

The study has a few limitations that may set a platform for future research. For instance, being a qualitative study that required an in-depth analysis, a small sample size was used. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of image communication, politics, and culture in Africa, a larger sample size could be beneficial.

Also, the study could benefit from a comparative analysis of male and female politicians. Although this was beyond the scope of the study, a comparative analysis would give a more holistic picture of the intersection between culture and visual representation in African politics. Additionally, this study is limited to only one African country, and although efforts were made to draw from other African contexts, researching more African countries would provide a more effective perspective to this study's problem. Despite its limitations, the study serves a critical purpose in positioning Africa's visual political communication within the wider realm of political communication.

Notes

1. In Kenya, the official campaign period begins approximately 90 days before the election date. In 2022, the campaign period officially began on May 29th (IEBC-Kenya). Politicians in Kenya have a tendency of updating their profile photos during campaign periods to convey key campaign messages.
2. Dholuo is a language spoken by the Luo ethnic group in Kenya. This profile photo was left out of the analysis because the researcher is not conversant with the language, and as such, could not offer a comprehensive analysis to the image.
3. IEBC is the Independent Electoral Boundaries Commission that is constitutionally mandated to conduct and oversee elections and referenda in Kenya.
4. UDA (United Democratic Alliance) is a political party in Kenya whose slogan is 'Kazi ni Kazi', loosely translating to every job is important. This slogan is embedded within the ideology of the party which seeks to empower small and medium-sized enterprises in Kenya as well as provide economic opportunities for ordinary Kenyans.
5. See footnote 6.
6. ODM (Orange Democratic Party) is a political party in Kenya. The party's symbol is an orange, and its slogan is 'Tuko Pamoja', a Swahili phrase that means 'We are Together', implying its intention to unite the people of Kenya.
7. See footnote 4.
8. The Agíkúyú (also known as Kikuyu) are a Bantu ethnic group located in central Kenya. They are the largest group in the country and one of the largest in East Africa.

9. This image follows the widely accepted cultural conventions of a typical leader among the Agíkúyú people. In this culture, the flywhisk is a symbol of courage and leadership, and to wave it is a declaration of triumph. Moreso, the apparel that is used in this image is the traditional Agíkúyú apparel.

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

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