

CULTURAL SYMBOLISM AND VISUAL POLITICAL MESSAGING IN AFRICA ONLINE CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract

The emergence of digital media has dramatically transformed political campaigning throughout Africa, making visual political messaging a key strategy for engaging voters and shaping ideologies. This study examined the significance of cultural symbolism in online political campaigns, focusing on how elements like indigenous signs, colors, clothing, gestures, and historical motifs are cleverly used on social media to create political meaning and emotional impact. The study was anchored on semiotic and visual communication theories. The analysis of selected 150 online campaign visuals from various African settings, in five major social media platforms, the instrument was structured questionnaire. The findings showed that cultural symbolism boosts the impact of messages, strengthens in-group identification, and fosters emotional engagement among digitally connected audiences. It also pointed out the potential dangers of symbolic exclusion and polarisation, as visuals rich in cultural meaning might marginalise minority identities or deepen ethno-political divides. By emphasising cultural symbolism as a vital aspect of visual political messaging, this research adds to the body of knowledge in African political communication and highlights the importance of culturally aware and ethically sound visual strategies in online campaigns.

Keywords: Cultural symbolism; Visual political communication; Online campaigns; African digital politics

Introduction

Political communication in Africa has seen a remarkable shift thanks to the rise of digital media and networked communication technologies.

With the explosion of social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok, the way political figures connect with citizens has transformed dramatically. Campaigns have moved away from being mostly text-heavy and broadcast-focused to becoming visually rich, interactive, and culturally vibrant forms of communication (Chadwick, 2017; Loader & Mercea, 2012). In this changing digital landscape, visual political messaging has become a vital tool, allowing political figures to express complex ideas quickly through images, symbols, and audiovisual stories that break through language barriers (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

In the context of African politics, visual communication is closely linked to culture, history, and shared memories. Symbols like traditional clothing, national colors, religious imagery, gestures, and local artifacts serve not just as decorative elements but as vessels of common meanings and political identity (Hall, 1997; Barthes, 1977, Taiwo & Oamen, 2018). These cultural symbols are often used in political campaigns to convey authenticity, legitimacy, and a sense of connection to “the people,” especially in societies marked by ethnic diversity and strong community ties (Nyamnjoh, 2017). Consequently, visual political messaging in Africa frequently draws inspiration from precolonial traditions, nationalist symbols, and postcolonial stories to emotionally resonate with a wide range of audiences (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010, Vokes, 2019).

The digitalisation of politics in Africa has also heightened the strategic use of cultural symbols. Online campaigns facilitate the quick sharing, remixing, and amplification of culturally significant visuals, allowing political messages to be tailored to specific audiences and cultural contexts (Castells, 2015). Scholars point out that the shift towards visual communication in digital political discourse encourages emotional engagement and symbolic connections, often placing more emphasis on feelings and imagery than on detailed policy discussions (Papacharissi, 2015). In Africa, where literacy rates and language diversity can vary

significantly, visual symbols serve as a powerful means of communication that can help bridge gaps created by socio-economic and educational differences (Wasserman, 2019).

However, using cultural symbols in visual political messaging comes with its own set of challenges. While these symbols can foster inclusion and celebrate cultural identity, they can also reinforce divisions based on ethnicity and politics, creating exclusionary narratives and populist messages when used strategically in online platforms (Müller, 2016; Tufekci, 2017). Therefore, it's crucial to understand how cultural symbolism functions in Africa's online political campaigns to critically examine current practices in political communication and their wider effects on democratic engagement and social unity in our digital world.

Statement of the Problem

The growing dependence on visual political messaging in Africa's online campaign landscape has intensified the strategic use of cultural symbols as tools for persuasion and voter mobilisation. While images, symbols, and culturally rich visuals are powerful ways to convey political messages across various linguistic and social groups, their increasing prevalence raises important questions about how meaning is constructed, the ethics of communication, and the inclusivity of democracy. Despite the clear presence of culturally significant visuals in African digital campaigns, there is still a lack of thorough academic understanding regarding how these symbols are chosen, presented, and interpreted in online political contexts.

A significant issue is that political figures often use cultural symbols in ways that emphasise emotional resonance and identity alignment rather than engaging in meaningful political dialogue. This emphasis on symbolism can often oversimplify complex political issues, leading to emotional reactions rather than fostering thoughtful civic discussions. In Africa's diverse and multi-ethnic societies, using cultural symbols in visual messaging without careful consideration can exacerbate ethno-political

divides, create exclusionary identities, and establish symbolic hierarchies, particularly when certain cultural narratives are prioritised over others. Additionally, the rapid spread and algorithm-driven promotion of campaign visuals on social media increase the chances of misunderstanding, manipulation, and symbolic conflicts. Visuals shared online can easily be taken out of context, altered, or weaponised to advance divisive narratives, spread misinformation, or bolster populist agendas, ultimately undermining democratic values and trust in political discourse. However, much of the research on African political campaigns has mainly focused on written rhetoric, voting behavior, or institutional dynamics, often neglecting the semiotic and cultural dimensions of visual political messaging in digital environments. This gap in academic research limits the ability of scholars, policymakers, and communication experts to fully assess the impact of cultural symbolism in Africa's digital political campaigns. Therefore, addressing this issue is essential for improving both the theoretical and practical understanding of visual political communication in Africa and for promoting more inclusive, ethical, and culturally sensitive online campaigning strategies.

Research Objectives

- i. To examine the forms and patterns of cultural symbolism employed in visual political messaging across African online campaign platforms.
- ii. To analyse how cultural symbols are semiotically constructed and framed to convey political meaning and identity in digital campaigns.
- iii. To assess audience interpretation and engagement with culturally symbolic visuals in African online political communication.
- iv. To evaluate the implications of culturally driven visual political messaging for democratic participation, inclusion and political

polarisation in Africa's digital space.

Research Questions

- i. What types of cultural symbols are most frequently utilised in visual political messaging within African online campaigns?
- ii. How are cultural symbols visually framed and semiotically deployed to communicate political narratives and legitimacy in digital campaigns?
- iii. How do online audiences interpret and respond to culturally symbolic political visuals in African contexts?
- iv. What are the democratic and socio-political implications of using cultural symbolism in visual political messaging across Africa's online campaign environments?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in comprehensive theoretical prisons that primarily draw from Semiotic Theory, and Cultural Representation Theory. It aims to shed light on how cultural symbolism is used and interpreted in visual political messaging within African online campaigns.

Semiotic Theory: As proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce further expanded by Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, serves as the core lens for analysing how images operate as systems of signs made up of signifiers and their meanings (Barthes, 1977). In the realm of African digital political campaigns, semiotics allows us to decode culturally rich visuals such as clothing, colors, gestures, and artifacts to reveal both their straightforward meanings and the deeper ideological messages they convey. This framework is especially useful for exploring how political figures legitimise power, identity, and authority through symbols that resonate culturally and are shared online.

This theory enables the study to interpret symbols such as flags, traditional attire, clenched fists, party logos, colours, and cultural artefacts. Also analyse hidden meanings, myths, and propaganda embedded in online

political visuals. It enables the study understand how African politicians and activists use culturally familiar symbols to influence audiences emotionally and politically.

Cultural Representation Theory: As propounded by Stuart Hall (1997), he developed the theory mainly through his works in cultural studies and media studies, particularly in “Representation: Cultural Representations and signifying Practices”. The main idea was to explain how media, language, visuals, and symbols construct meanings about people, culture, politics, and society. It was also to investigate how cultural meanings are created, shared, and challenged within political communication. This lens is vital for grasping how African cultural symbols are recontextualised in online political messaging to build collective identities, foster a sense of belonging, or, on the flip side, marginalise alternative cultural narratives. It argues that representation does not merely reflect reality; that it actively creates and shapes reality through images, symbols, discourse, and communication.

Hall maintained that meaning is produced through shared cultural codes, signs, and symbols that audiences understand within their social and historical contexts.

These theoretical perspectives offer a solid analytical framework for examining the symbolic, visual, and cultural aspects of political communication in Africa's digital landscape. The semiotic theory help researchers analyse the meanings behind political symbols and visual signs used in African online campaigns, while cultural representation theory is highly relevant to this study because African online political campaigns heavily depend on visual representations to communicate ideology, identity, power, resistance, and culture.

Review of Related Literature

Cultural symbolism is all about using signs, images, artifacts, and practices that are deeply rooted in culture to express shared meanings within a specific social group (Yeku & Ojebode, 2021). In the realm of African political communication, cultural symbols like traditional clothing, religious imagery, native languages, and historical figures serve as vital sources of collective memory and identity. These symbols carry weight; they are shaped by society and strategically used to legitimise authority, stir emotional connections, and strengthen group identity. They demonstrate how digital visual culture in Nigeria reconstructs historical memories and reinforces cultural identity online (Tatteo & Motsaathebe, 2024).

Visual political messaging involves the clever use of images, videos, colors, design elements, and visual stories to convey political ideas and sway public opinion (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In the world of digital campaigns, visuals often take the lead over text because of their immediacy, emotional impact, and visibility in algorithms. In African contexts, these visuals often merge contemporary digital styles with traditional cultural elements to create a powerful symbolic connection (Wasserman, 2019).

Online political campaigns leverage digital platforms for mobilising, persuading, and engaging the public (Chadwick, 2017). Social media makes it easy to spread messages quickly and interact with audiences, allowing political figures to customise their messages for specific cultural and demographic groups. In Africa, these online campaigns have become essential arenas for negotiating identity, power, and legitimacy, particularly among younger populations (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019).

Political semiotics looks at how political meanings are created and shared through signs and symbols. He analyses Afrocentric symbolism and visual rhetoric in South African online political campaigns and protests (Thatelo, 2025). In the context of African online campaigns, a semiotic analysis uncovers how cultural symbols are infused with ideological

meanings that either normalise political authority or cast opponents in a negative light. This idea is crucial for understanding the hidden power dynamics that are woven into visual political messages.

Audience interpretation is all about how people decode and make sense of political messages, influenced by their cultural knowledge, social experiences, and ideological beliefs. Explores how African political actors strategically use visual symbols and social media imagery to communicate identity and power (Gakahu, 2024). In Africa, audiences interpret visual political messages through the lenses of their ethnicity, religion, history, and socio-political contexts, making the process of meaning-making a complex and sometimes contested journey, especially in online environments.

Researchers have noted a significant 'visual turn' in political communication, where images are increasingly taking center stage in political discussions (Mitchell, 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Visuals have a knack for simplifying intricate political narratives and boosting emotional engagement, making them powerful tools in digital campaigns both globally and in Africa's rapidly changing democracies. It further discussed how African visual symbols communicate cultural heritage, communal values, and identity across societies (Ocak, 2025).

Studies highlight that political communication in Africa is deeply rooted in culture, drawing from oral traditions, symbols, and community values (Nyamnjoh, 2017). Political figures often strategically use cultural elements to present themselves as authentic and connected to their communities, especially during election periods (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010).

The rise of digital media has transformed political participation in Africa, creating new avenues for expression and mobilisation (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). Online platforms enable political visuals rich with cultural symbolism to spread quickly, shaping political narratives in ways that bypass traditional media gatekeepers. Added that protest symbols,

flags, slogans, and digital imagery as representations of collective memory and political resistance in Nigeria. (Victor-Inyere et al, 2026).

Cultural symbolism is vital for constructing identity and negotiating power in political communication (Bosch, 2017, Ocak, 2025). In African online campaigns, symbols are often employed to delineate “us” versus “them,” fostering in-group solidarity while potentially sidelining others (Müller, 2016).

There's an increasing concern about the ethical ramifications of visual political messaging, especially regarding the manipulation of cultural symbols for populist or divisive purposes (Papacharissi, 2015). Scholars suggest that visuals packed with emotion can actually hinder rational discussions in politics and weaken democratic accountability (Yékú & Ojebode, 2021).

Empirical review shows that political campaigns in Africa often lean heavily on culturally significant visuals to boost voter connection and trust Thatelo & Motsaathebe, (2024). Afrocentric visual analysis of online political posters: A case of South Africa's July 2021 unrest. The study analyses Afrocentric symbolism and visual rhetoric in South African online political campaigns and protests. Studies indicate that visually engaging political content on social media tends to get more interaction than plain text messages in African settings. Images that include cultural references draw in likes, shares, and comments, which help to expand political outreach.

Ojebode & Adagbola (2021), “From Google Doodles to Facebook: Nostalgia and Visual Reconstructions of the Past in Nigeria”. The study was anchored on Cultural Representation and Digital Media Theories. The study found that digital platforms such as Google and Facebook reconstruct historical memories through visual communication. Nigerians use historical photographs and nostalgic imagery online to express dissatisfaction with contemporary governance. Visual narratives on social media reinforce collective memory, identity, and political consciousness. Again it

maintained that political visuals online function as tools of cultural remembrance and ideological communication. The study recommended that greater scholarly attention to digital visual culture in Africa. This study relates to the present research because it demonstrates how visual political communication in Africa is rooted in shared history, collective memory, and cultural symbolism. It supports the argument that online political visuals communicate meanings beyond ordinary images and shape political consciousness in African digital campaigns.

Eze (2024) in his study “A Comparative Analysis of the Congratulatory Messages to Presidents Buhari and Tinubu's Inaugurations in Select Nigerian Newspapers,” examined the discursive framing of congratulatory messages and use of images that were published in Nigerian newspapers during the inauguration periods of Muhammadu Buhari (2019) and Bola Ahmed Tinubu (2023). It utilised media framing theory, rhetorical criticism, and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the study explored how these seemingly ceremonial messages and images function as political texts that shape presidential image and legitimised leadership. The findings indicated that while Buhari's messages focused on national stability, moral integrity, and institutional continuity, Tinubu's messages foregrounded political renewal, ethnic symbolism, and strategic loyalty. These messages served not merely as public relations tools, but as communicative rituals that reflected elite interests, regional dynamics, and symbolic power.

Uduakobong & Umoh (2020). *Perspectivation in Nigeria's Political Visual Communication: A Social Semiotic Analysis.*” This study employed Semiotic, Critical Discourse Analysis and Visual Communication Theory. Major findings show that Nigerian political visuals use symbols, typography, colours, and framing strategically. Also that political campaign imagery influences public perception of candidates. And that visual political communication carries ideological meanings embedded within cultural contexts. The studies recommended that more research into visual political

discourse in Africa; that greater critical awareness of ideological meanings in campaign visuals, and expansion of semiotic analysis in African political communication studies.

The related literature supports the current study by showing how African political visuals employ symbolic and cultural meanings to influence audiences during political campaigns.

In a related study Eze et al, (2025), *Colour-Coded Emotions in Health Campaigns: A Semiotic Analysis of Visual Therapeutic Messages*". This study explored how colours are used to convey emotions and therapeutic intent in health campaigns, employed a semiotic framework to decode their symbolic meanings and communicative effectiveness. Drawing its theoretical lenses on Peircean semiotics and colour-emotion theories, it investigated select print and digital health campaign materials across themes such as mental health, HIV/AIDS awareness, COVID-19, and reproductive health. The research identified dominant colour codes. For instance, blue for calmness, red for urgency or danger, green for wellness, and analysed how they work in tandem with textual and pictorial elements to shape viewer perception. The findings suggested colours not only guide emotional responses but influenced message interpretation, trust, and therapeutic potential of communication. Moreover, cultural contexts affect the symbolic interpretation of colours, pointed the need for localised design strategies. However, it contributed to visual communication and health promotion literature by emphasising colour as a semiotic and therapeutic tool.

Another scholarly review by Bosch & Mutsvairo (2017) "Pictures, Protests and Politics: Mapping Twitter Images during South Africa's Fees Must Fall Campaign". The study employed Visual Communication Theory and Networked Public Sphere Theory. The study revealed that protest images circulated on X played important roles in mobilising political participation. It also said that those visual images intensified emotional responses and strengthened solidarity among protesters. The researchers

recommended increased examination of visual social media activism in Africa, and greater scholarly focus on citizen-generated political imagery. The study is relevant because it explains how visual political messaging on social media shapes public opinion and political mobilisation. It supports the present study's focus on cultural symbolism and visual political communication in African online campaigns.

Empirical studies confirm that visual political messages are understood differently by various cultural groups. The meanings can be negotiated, resisted, or reinterpreted based on the audience's socio-cultural background, supporting Gakahu's (2024) encoding/decoding model in the context of African digital media.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, blending both techniques to gain a well-rounded understanding of cultural symbolism and visual political messaging in Africa's online campaign landscape. This approach was chosen because it allows for a deep dive into the meanings of visuals while also capturing trends in audience engagement and perception across digital platforms (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The qualitative focused on the semiotic and visual analysis of 150 campaign images and videos, while it quantitatively took a closer look at audience engagement metrics and perception trends. The focus was on online political campaign materials created by various political parties and candidates across African nations during recent elections, along with social media users who interact with these campaign visuals. Major social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok were selected; as they are where visual political messaging really shines.

These campaign visuals were chosen using critical sampling, a branch a purposive sampling technique, specifically targeting those that prominently display cultural symbols such as traditional clothing, indigenous artifacts, national colors, religious imagery, and historical icons.

A diverse array of visuals was selected from different African political contexts to ensure a rich cultural representation. For the quantitative aspect, stratified sampling helped in choosing online respondents across various age groups, genders, and regions to capture a wide range of interpretive perspectives.

In terms of visual content collection, we gathered screenshots and archived copies of campaign posters, images, and short videos shared on social media. For the engagement metrics analysis, we looked at likes, shares, comments, and reposts linked to the selected visuals. An online survey questionnaire was crafted to evaluate audience interpretation, emotional responses, and the perceived credibility of culturally symbolic visuals.

The main tools used in this study included a visual analysis coding sheet based on semiotic categories such as denotation, connotation, myth, and ideology, and a structured questionnaire using Likert-scale items (Compressed into Agreed and Disagreed Decision) to measure audience perception and engagement. These instruments were validated through expert reviews and a pilot study. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages and mean scores) to identify engagement patterns and interpretive trends. Validity was ensured through methodological triangulation, while reliability is strengthened through consistent coding procedures and intercoder agreement checks. The survey instrument reliability was tested using internal consistency measures.

The study adhered to established ethical standards by ensuring anonymity of survey respondents, responsible use of publicly available online materials and avoidance of misrepresentation of cultural symbols. Informed consent was obtained from all survey participants, and data were used strictly for academic purposes.

Data Presentation

Table 1: Campaign Visuals by Social Media Platform

Platform	Number of Visuals	Percentage (%)
Facebook	45	30.0
X (Twitter)	30	20.0
Instagram	40	26.7
TikTok	35	23.3
Total	150	100.0

Table 2: Types of Cultural Symbols Used

Symbol Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Traditional attire	38	25.3
National colours/symbols	32	21.3
Religious imagery	27	18.0
Historical figures/events	24	16.0
Indigenous artefacts/gestures	29	19.4
Total	150	100.0

Table 3: Dominant Visual Messaging Themes

Theme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Unity and national integration	36	24.0
Cultural authenticity	34	22.7
Leadership legitimacy	28	18.7
Youth mobilisation	27	18.0
Change and reform	25	16.6
Total	150	100.0

Table 4: Semiotic Coding of Visuals

Semiotic Level	Description	Number of Visuals
Denotation	Literal depiction of symbols	150
Connotation	Cultural/emotional meanings	112
Myth/Ideology	Power, legitimacy, nationalism	89

Table 5: Audience Interpretation Patterns

Interpretation Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Positive identification	62	41.3
Neutral interpretation	41	27.3
Critical/contested reading	30	20.0
Negative reaction	17	11.4
Total	150	100.0

Table 6: Engagement Metrics of Campaign Visuals

Metric	Average per Visual
Likes/Reactions	1240
Shares/Reposts	410
Comments	285
Video views	5600

Table 7: Perceived Democratic Implications

Implication	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Enhances political participation	68.0	32.0
Promotes cultural inclusion	61.3	38.7
Encourages polarisation	54.0	46.0
Shifts focus from policy to identity	72.7	27.3

Analysis of Findings

The findings reveal that Facebook had the highest number of campaign visuals (45; 30.0%), followed by Instagram (40; 26.7%) and TikTok (35; 23.3%), while X (formerly Twitter) had the least representation (30; 20.0%). This distribution indicates that African political figures tend to favor visually-driven platforms that excel in image and video content. The strong presence of Facebook and Instagram highlights their popularity and ability to tell cultural stories through visuals, while TikTok's rise underscores the increasing significance of short-form audiovisual narratives in political mobilisation, especially among younger audiences.

The analysis shows that traditional attire was the most commonly used cultural symbol (38; 25.3%), closely followed by national colors and symbols (32; 21.3%). Indigenous artifacts and gestures (29; 19.4%) and religious imagery (27; 18.0%) were also prominent, while historical figures and events made up 16.0% of the visuals. This trend illustrates a conscious

focus on culturally familiar and emotionally impactful symbols that convey authenticity, continuity, and legitimacy. The prominence of traditional attire and national symbols highlights the strategic crafting of political identity rooted in a shared cultural heritage.

Data on thematic framing indicates that messages focused on unity and national integration were the most prevalent in the visuals (36; 24.0%), followed by cultural authenticity (34; 22.7%) and leadership legitimacy (28; 18.7%). Youth mobilisation (27; 18.0%) and narratives centered on change (25; 16.6%) were also noticeable. These findings indicate that cultural symbolism often aligns with inclusive and legitimising narratives designed to resonate with a wide audience, while also specifically targeting certain demographic groups, like young people, through visuals shared online.

A semiotic analysis shows that all the visuals examined operated at a literal level, showcasing straightforward representations of cultural symbols. However, 112 of these visuals went further, tapping into connotative meanings that stirred emotional and cultural connections, while 89 visuals conveyed deeper ideological myths tied to power, nationalism, and political authority. This complex semiotic structure reveals that cultural symbols in online campaigns do more than just represent; they embed ideological narratives that normalise political claims and reinforce leadership authority.

Data on audience interpretation reveals that 41.3% of respondents felt a positive connection with culturally symbolic visuals, suggesting they resonated emotionally and were accepted. Meanwhile, 27.3% had neutral interpretations, and 20.0% engaged in more critical or contested readings. Negative responses came from 11.4% of participants. These results align with the encoding/decoding framework, indicating that while dominant interpretations are common, audience understanding is still negotiated and influenced by cultural context.

Looking at engagement metrics, we see high average interaction levels, with visuals garnering around 1,240 likes, 410 shares, and 285 comments per post. Video-based visuals, in particular, attracted an impressive average of 5,600 views. These numbers underscore the effectiveness of culturally symbolic visuals in capturing online attention and fostering interaction, highlighting their strategic importance in digital political campaigns.

Additionally, the findings show that 68.0% of respondents agreed that culturally symbolic visuals boost political participation, while 61.3% felt they promote cultural inclusion. However, 54.0% recognised that such visuals could also lead to political polarisation, and 72.7% shifting their campaign focus from solid policy discussions to appeals based on identity. This shift highlights the mixed democratic effects of using cultural symbols in visual political messaging.

The findings from the study on cultural symbolism and visual political messaging in Africa's online campaigns reveal several interconnected themes, which we'll explore through the lenses of Semiotic Theory, Visual Communication Theory, and Cultural Representation Theory.

The heavy use of visuals on Facebook (30.0%) and Instagram (26.7%) shows a strategic choice of platforms that really engage users visually. From the Visual Communication Theory standpoint, these platforms allow political figures to mix images, text, colors, and motion to grab attention and evoke emotions (Ocak, 2025). TikTok's notable share (23.3%) indicates a targeted approach towards younger audiences with short, engaging audiovisual content, reflecting how digital campaigns adapt to the viewing habits of different age groups. This platform-specific strategy highlights how digital tools shape the way political messages are constructed.

The use of traditional clothing (25.3%), national colors (21.3%), and indigenous artifacts (19.4%) shows a conscious effort to use cultural symbols that convey authenticity and political legitimacy. Through the lens of Semiotic Theory, these symbols act as signifiers that carry deeper meanings, connecting candidates to their heritage, shared memories, and community values. Cultural Representation Theory further explains how these visuals help build political identity, creating a sense of belonging and strengthening group solidarity. Political figures seem to be balancing cultural traditions with modern political narratives, merging the old with the new in today's digital landscape.

Themes of unity, cultural authenticity, leadership legitimacy, youth engagement, and reform have emerged as the analysis of dominant messaging themes. Through semiotic and visual analysis, we see that these themes are communicated not just on a surface level (denotation) but are also rich with emotional depth (connotation) and ideological layers (myth/ideology). Take, for instance, images showcasing traditional attire alongside youth engagement; they beautifully blend respect for heritage with forward-thinking aspirations, signaling a commitment to inclusive leadership. This idea resonates with Visual Communication Theory, which suggests that the way visuals are framed can shape how viewers interpret them and respond emotionally, ultimately making the message more impactful.

When we looked at how audiences interpreted these visuals, we found that 41.3% had a positive identification with them, while 20% offered critical perspectives, and 11.4% had negative reactions. This aligns with Hall's encoding/decoding model, which indicates that while campaign creators embed their intended meanings, the audience's interpretation is influenced by their cultural context. Thus, visuals function in a lively communicative space where the meaning is collaboratively shaped by political figures and audiences connected through digital networks.

The findings of this study shed light on the complex nature of culturally symbolic visuals. While 68% of respondents felt these visuals boost political participation, 54% recognised the risk of polarisation, and 72.7% observed a shift from discussions about policy to those centered on identity. This mixed response highlights the ethical and political dilemmas faced in online campaigns: symbols can foster inclusion and engagement, but they can also deepen divisions or reinforce exclusion based on ethnicity. Theoretical insights suggest that the strength of symbols lies in their ability to convey intricate socio-political meanings in a concise manner, yet this power must be handled with care to prevent adverse effects on democracy (Papacharissi, 2015; Müller, 2016).

The impressive engagement metrics 1,240 likes, 410 shares, 285 comments, and 5,600 video views clearly illustrate how effective visual political messaging can be in reaching and energising audiences. Visual Communication Theory tells us that using a mix of visuals can really boost how memorable, emotionally impactful, and shareable a message is, especially when it's rooted in culture. The research shows that African political campaigns are increasingly tapping into these advantages to broaden their reach, shape how voters see things, and enhance symbolic stories in the digital world.

The discussion highlights that cultural symbolism in African online political campaigns serves as a clever communication strategy. It weaves together cultural authenticity, ideological messages, and emotional engagement, all influenced by the platforms used and how audiences respond. The study uncovers both the empowering aspects of culturally rich visual messaging for participation and identity-building, as well as the dangers of division, symbolic exclusion, and shifting policy focus. These insights underscore the importance of Semiotic Theory, Visual Communication Theory, and Cultural Representation Theory in grasping digital political communication in Africa.

Conclusion

This study looked into how cultural symbolism plays a role in visual political messaging within Africa's online campaign landscape, emphasising its strategic importance for political communication, identity formation, and engaging voters. The findings reveal that African political figures intentionally use traditional clothing, national colors, local artifacts, religious symbols, and historical references to convey authenticity, legitimacy, and ideological messages.

An analysis of campaign visuals across social media platforms showed that Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are the leading spaces for culturally resonant messaging, highlighting how platform features shape message design and audience engagement. A semiotic analysis indicated that visuals work on several levels: denotative, connotative, and ideological, allowing politicians to communicate complex socio-political meanings quickly and effectively. Audience interpretation showed both agreement and disagreement, highlighting how dynamic meaning-making is in the realm of digital political communication.

The study also pointed out the complex democratic effects of culturally symbolic visuals. On one hand, they boost political participation, promote cultural inclusion, and engage younger audiences. On the other hand, they can also deepen polarisation, spark identity-based political conflicts, and overshadow meaningful policy discussions. The high engagement metrics reveal just how effective these visuals are at grabbing attention and encouraging interaction, which only amplifies their political influence.

In summary, cultural symbolism serves as a potent semiotic and communicative tool, connecting tradition with digital modernity, while influencing political perceptions and civic involvement in Africa's online campaigns. However, we must approach its power with ethical care to avoid exclusionary or divisive outcomes.

Recommendations

- i. Political figures should make sure that cultural symbolism in online campaigns fosters inclusion and unity, steering clear of representations that might marginalise minority groups or heighten ethno-political tensions.
- ii. Campaign designers ought to take audience diversity into account when interpreting cultural symbols, choosing visuals that resonate with various demographic and socio-cultural groups to enhance engagement and minimise misinterpretation.
- iii. Electoral management bodies and digital platform regulators should create guidelines for the responsible use of cultural symbols in online political campaigns, especially to curb symbolic manipulation and polarisation.
- iv. Training in semiotics, visual communication, and cultural literacy should be offered to political campaign teams to ensure that online visuals are culturally aware, ethically sound, and strategically effective. Also, scholars should delve into longitudinal studies examining the changing impact of cultural symbolism in African online campaigns.

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