

LOCALISM IN VISUAL DESIGN: REDEFINING KENYA'S DIGITAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

Galvanized by the Covid-19 pandemic, the adoption of the digital economy in Africa is growing at an exponential rate. Rapid digitalization is affecting all aspects of life – including the way we interact, work, shop, and receive services – as well as how value is created and exchanged (UNCTAD, 2021. p. iv). But amid this global media evolution, ‘we see a resurgence of localism and a longing for local qualities. “Local” is no longer just a geographic marker; it has become a quality, a value in itself (The Beach, 2008.). From a community context, we are experiencing localized experiences that were brought upon from the extended lock-downs. From trending “#shoplocal” hashtags that urge others to support businesses by shopping from local neighbors; to the creation of Whatsapp forums to connect people or expand businesses – Localism is becoming an embedded phenomenon in our digital lives. This paper aims to define, critic, and discuss these new forms of localism, and how they are shaping Kenya’s digital landscape. Using descriptive case study research, we shall cite three brands/groups in the Kenyan market and interrogate how their visual designs are becoming more personalized, possess granular detail of cultural nuance, infuse community inputs, or embed ‘local’ language in their executions; to deliver authentic and meaningful interactions with their audiences. ‘Localism’ is one of the hallmarks of sustainism (The Beach, 2008)’ a new form of modernism. The study aims to shed light on exemplary ‘sustainism’ tactics applied by a music band on Instagram, a video-on-demand app on Twitter, and talented school kids on the BBC. Indeed, visual design in Kenya is finally coming of age, bringing with it a kind of localism that links the local to the global in novel ways. Forget aesthetics. Today, it’s about driving value.

Keywords: localism, visual design, sustainism, digital media, “shop local”

1.0 INTRODUCTION

It is argued that local produce (and products) will become more accessible and sustainable lifestyles will become the new norm (Diakrousi, A. & de Moor, M. 2021). The same can be said for the design industry.

Galvanized by the Covid-19 pandemic, the adoption of the digital economy in Africa is growing at an exponential rate. Rapid digitalization is affecting all aspects of life – including the way we interact, work, shop, and receive services – as well as how value is created and exchanged (UNCTAD, 2021. p. iv). But amid this global media evolution, ‘we see a resurgence of localism and a longing for local qualities. “Local” is no longer just a geographic marker; it has become a quality, a value in itself (The Beach, 2008)’. In Africa today, we are seeing the role of the visual arts in the digital world taking on ‘localism’ contexts, as the appetite for local and cultural dimensions rises. A good example from the film industry is how African content is being sought after by giant film brands such as Netflix and Disney +.

On a macro scale, there is also the ongoing ‘debate about the need to include the cultural dimension as a part of sustainable development (Pei, X. 2016)’. Pei argues that the framework of sustainable development and the role of cultural sustainability is still vague, both in theory and practice. Therefore, research paper is an attempt at unearthing the co-relation between, localism, visual design, and the sustainism outcomes thereof, that are redefining Kenya’s digital media landscape.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The paper uses a descriptive, multiple case study design. Data collected from theoretical discourse, literature review, video interview and real-life examples were analyzed and made up the findings for this paper. Three distinctively different Kenyan brands/groups in the market were identified, their digital footprint used to inform how localism is embedded in their digital communication. The researcher gathered a mix of video interview insights, theory, pictorial, and copy illustrations. These were then packaged visually and in prose to inform on key attributes of localism in the visual design space.

The brands under study are Sauti Sol, Netflix Kenya, and H-Town Kids. The social media platforms used were mainly YouTube (BBC’s channel), Twitter, and Instagram. This study was conducted in Kiambu, Kenya.

3.0 THEORY

Since visual design does not exist in isolation but rather as a medium of expression across fields and disciplines, it is prudent to understand what localism is to be able to identify its manifestations when expressed; in this case, on social media. This will also act as a ‘checker’ mechanism.

3.1. What is localism?

There perhaps exists numerous definitions of this word, however, this paper leans towards definitions that suit the topic centered on design (creative and cultural arts).

According to artandeducation.net localism in the arts can be explained as:

Localism reasserts the importance of the local in the development of society. As such, it is conceived as a crowdsourced, user-generated exhibition, critiquing the established methodologies of art presentation—namely, overinvestment in authorship, spectacle, and commerce.

Localism in architecture can be expressed as, ‘providing a powerful opportunity to help change attitudes towards development through genuine, positive and inspiring engagement (Fluid Architecture. 2011)’.

Ylidiz Entegre (2019) has a simpler definition of modern localism in design and wrote: ‘localism is a design approach that combines our cultural identity with modern design. It creatively customizes traditional, locality and cultural identity to the present in the context (of design).’

3.2 Localism across community experiences

According to the McKinsey Report (Arora, A., Dahlstrom, P., Hazan E., Khan H., Khanna, R., 2020), the near-total shutdown of travel and other current lockdown constraints have made local neighborhoods much more important. Many community social-media pages and forums have been created to connect people. Private WhatsApp chats, to public business groups and other networked communities, are becoming important vehicles for communication.

We are seeing a higher appreciation for collaborations and open-sourced initiatives across sectors, be it for work, for community engagement, commerce and even across entertainment.

3.3 Localism as a driver of democratizing commerce

The McKinsey report proposes that the power to manage hyperlocal activity and enhance engagement on digital platforms rests on marketers and designers. They can enable the ‘rewiring of operating model to provide a more granular presence at scale, focused on personalization (particularly analytics, trigger-based messaging, and agile test-and-learn approaches), and managing performance (Arora, A. et al 2020).

There is a deliberate effort by companies to invest in being more ‘visible’ online to widen their audience base as well as commercial gain potential. Coupled with this is that enterprises have greatly increased their digital promotion budgets to enable customer acquisition and increase their share of wallet for their products and services.

3.4 Peer power as a precipitate of localism

The universe is congregating online - from work and school going fully/partially remote, to isolated people resorting to social media to seek solace/entertainment through their their mobile devices - the digital world as we know it is becoming a necessary source for content consumption. Impossible to be ignored by brands and organizations, having and maintaining a ‘fanbase’ has become a critical driver for entrepreneurial success. Hard advertising as we know is becoming obsolete, and in its stead, authentic, ‘unstaged’ local content. Influencer marketing is also becoming a powerful vehicle for effective digital promotion. With the relevant influencers, brands have access to a new pool of consumers that match their target audience (Plaint Agency. n.d.).

Paul Armstrong (2020), a Forbes magazine contributor wrote, ‘consumers are connecting with peers for personal and commercial gain. As communities unite to share, advise and purchase en masse,

brands can no longer overlook the power of the crowd’.

3.5 Kenyan Localism

In the Kenyan digital media space, we too are witnessing the coming of age of localism. Particularly in the entertainment and commercial advertising industry, one sees a perfect harmony of local (and cultural), past and present cues being represented creatively within visual design contexts. Trending hashtags such as #shoplocal #madeinkenya #nairobi are understood and commonplace. Strategies such as the Nyumba Kumi initiatives are ‘anchoring community policing at various levels that is a household level, market, estate among others’ (Ndonu, W., Muthama, N. J., & Muigua, K. 2019).

Local, native, and colloquial languages are blended in naturally to suit the contexts being communicated. It is safe to say that brands (emerging, new, and established) in this market are rethinking the playbook of digital advertising. There is a perceived departure from a pure focus on the ‘aesthetics’ and more on the ‘content delivery’ or ‘value offering’.

3.6 Drawing parallels between Localism vs Sustainism

According to a manifesto by the Sustainism founders, Michiel Schwarz & Joost Elffers: After the twentieth century’s modernism and postmodernism, a new cultural era has begun. Our manifesto Sustainism Is the New Modernism* charts a new way of doing and seeing that is already evident across society, in everything from architecture and design to business practices to food production.

We have given it a name: Sustainism. We are signaling a transition to a new lifestyle, and offering a picture of a world that is more connected, more localized, and more sustainable (Shwarz, M. and Elffers, J. 2011).

In the context of localism, they further clarify sustainism’s correlation to the ‘metaphor for the new culture, the ‘web’, by stating:

It’s as much concerned with the internet, social media, and open-source information. And amidst these global trends, we (see) a growing interest in finding local qualities, for example in our food (think of the 6000 plus local farmer’s markets). In one line: sustainism is where connectivity, a new kind of localism and sustainable lifestyles meet.

Sustainism (or whatever name you wish to call the new culture) is bringing its style and perspective: diverse rather than uniform; effective instead of efficient; networked instead of hierarchical. It stands for the perspective of long-term investment and appropriate speed, rather than “quick return” and “faster is better.” From functionality to meaning, from space to place.

Expressed with a ‘trefoil knot (Fig. 1), it symbolizes the endless cycle of life and an interrelated world. From media, knowledge, sustainable development, in sustainism, everyone and everything is connected. This is the culture of networks, sharing, borrowing, and open exchange (Shwarz, M. and Elffers, J. 2011)’.



Fig 1. The Sustainism symbol, trefoil knot. This symbol explains how in sustainism everything is connected and loops together, a circle of life. Source: beyondsocial.org

This craving for humans to connect, interact, transact, shop, dine, receive services, is what can be associated with the sustainist school of thought. Built of 4 principles, sustainism is about sharing, localism, connectedness, and proportionality (Diakrousi, A & de Moor, M. 2011). Localism, therefore, becomes an expression of it – with interconnectedness at its core.

3.7 Sustainism and Design

Climate crisis activists have issued a global outcry challenging leaders, designers to come up with sustainable solutions that mobilize human activities and technological advancements to secure the survival of humanity, and the earth's resources. Schwarz & Diana (2013), made the recommendation that, for sustainist design, artists should initiate ideas and concepts that evoke human emotion, ideas that are shareable and scaled to be manageable within the designated community. These ideas, therefore, need to start from a local context and organically build upwards.

Now that we have defined and deeply reflected upon localism and sustainism principles, the paper discusses the new different forms of localism and how it is shaping and redefining Kenya's digital media landscape 'to meet the new and essential needs of cultural sustainability – or as coined, sustainism (Shwarz, M & Ellfers J. 2011)'.

4.0 FINDINGS

What follows, are rich visual expressions of Kenyan localism; players who are either driving demand (commerce) & connectedness or providing shared entertainment (spectacle).

4.1 Sauti Sol: A Hyperlocal boy band that celebrates You - The Fan

Not a mean feat, this boy band has been in existence for over 20 years and still is thriving in the Kenyan and global music scene. Enjoying their well-earned bragging rights, Bien Baraza (a vocalist and lead member of Sauti Sol) said on Word Is;

We have relaxed and taken time for our fans to listen and internalize the 'Midnight Train'

album. It is still the number one album on some platforms since we released it last year. We are still working on some new albums on the way (Ngige, E. 2021).

Unbeknownst to most, is that this could also be interpreted to mean that they are also focused on solidifying their fanbase locally and globally.

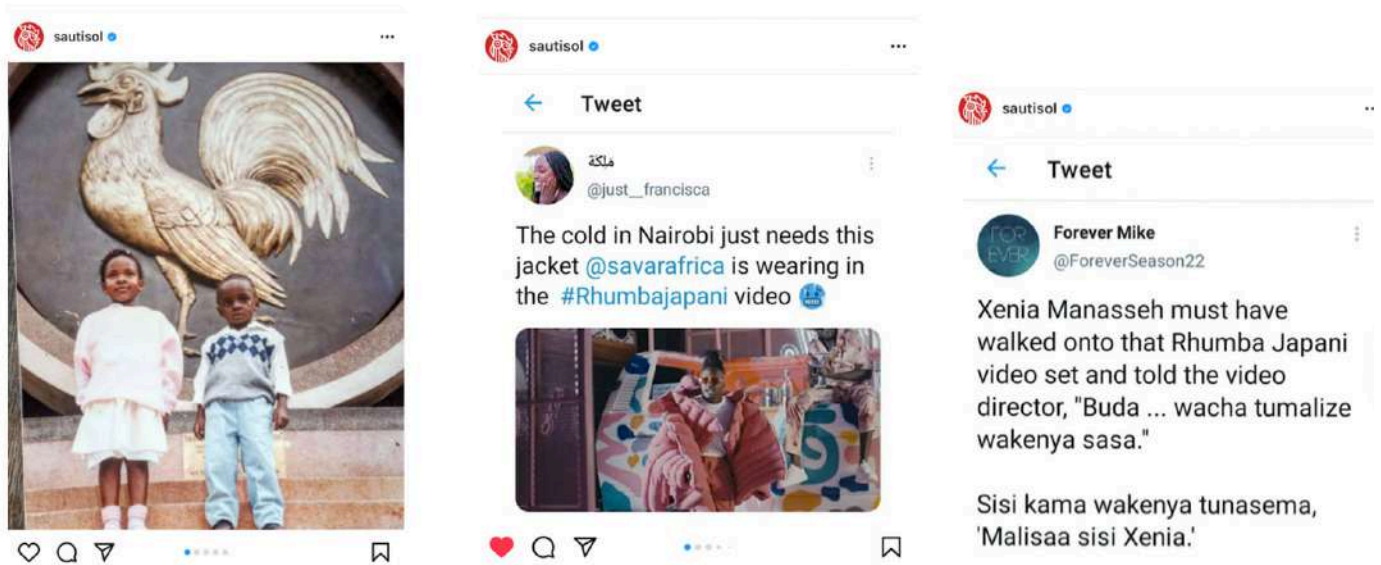


Fig 2. 3. And 4. User-generated visual and copy content used for promoting Sauti Sol – An example of ‘peer power’ localism by design. Source: Instagram@sautisol

Fig 2, 3, and 4 are just but a glimpse of some of the huge amounts of consumer-generated content from their handles. Content crafted and designed by the public is then, repackaged (unretouched) and used to promote Sauti Sols events/sponsorships, or just to celebrate their fans. There is a deliberate attempt to have the content be by the people and for the people as regards to celebrating themselves.

One notices that aesthetics has gone out the window and what one sees instead is a deeper level of solidarity with Kenyans and fans; putting them first. Endless ‘unedited airtime’ of their fan’s tweets and comments are shared on both Instagram and Twitter.

4.1.1 Localism visual cues include:

The image of kids standing in front of a cockerel monument (Fig 2) is also a device that is used in Sauti Sol’s identity. Interestingly, this cockerel symbol is memorable to any millennial as it represented the Nyayo era, powerful leadership, and party symbol of the late, President Moi (Larsen, L. 2013). They even use the emoji of the cockerel in posts (Fig. 6) for subliminal advertising.

Other manifestations include:

4.1.1.1 Nostalgic referencing on Fig 2, the children are standing in front of Kenya’s most iconic monument at Uhuru Gardens; the Nyayo monument. A public park that most Kenyan millennials are familiar with and visited in their childhood.

4.1.1.2 Fig. 4 references 'sisi kama Wakenya' loosely translated as 'us Kenyans' is a classic sign of patriotism and love for our country.

4.1.1.3 Sheng, Swaenglish mixed with proper English content is evident across most communication on their social media handle. Informal speak lends authenticity and deeper meanings for and by the audiences.

4.1.1.4 Minimal staged or orchestrated shoots for advertising - unless it's content crafted for the music band, most digital contents are crafted almost ad hoc; at random and don't sound 'salesy'. User-generated content is screenshot and posted in a slapstick manner.



Fig 5 & 6. Images of Sauti Sol wearing Afrikan wear: Source: Instagram@sautisol

4.1.1.5. Localism is also seen in their fashion sense (Fig. 5 and 6). Celebrating local authentic fabrics such as the kitenge and Ankara, are worn in vibrant colours. These bold colours are preferred by women, but Sauti Sol are not afraid to step out in African fashion and over-the-top glamour.

This hometown boy band is the embodiment of 'sustainism'. Though their ideals are deeply rooted in Kenya, they are still sophisticated enough to attract a global appeal.

4.2 Netflix: Hyperlocal and clever marketing

Streaming in more than 30 languages and 190 countries, Netflix claim, they 'want to entertain the

world and give you access to the best-in-class TV shows, movies and documentaries (Netflix, n.d.)’. Despite the 2016 censorship scare by the Kenya Film Classification Board claiming that Netflix is a threat to ‘moral values and national security (Barnes, H. H. 2016)’ – Netflix Kenya, entered the market in 2021 to provide a chance for Android phone users to access Netflix on their mobile phones for free (Oluwole, V. 2021).

This was a clever move as Kenyans are known for their love of free things. Their advertising was not only informed by Kenyan nuanced insights, but it was also a timely one. They entered a market when most people were at home as a consequence of the enforced lockdowns.

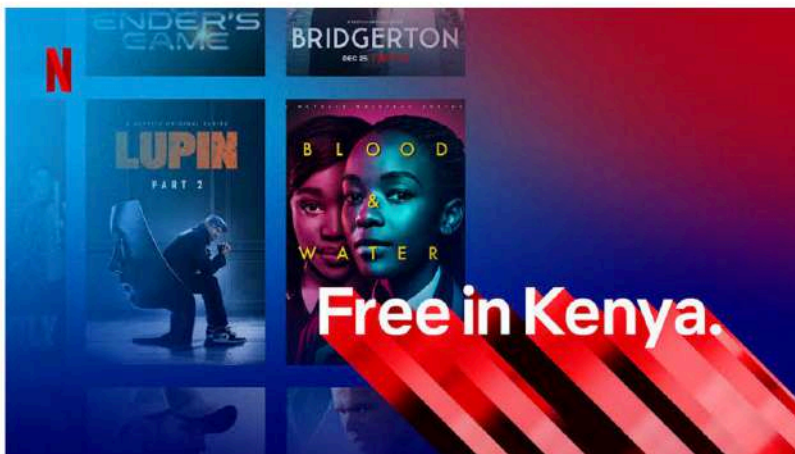


Fig 7. (Left) An announcement web banner of Netflix Kenyan launch campaign Source: Twitter/ @netflixkenya

Fig 8. (Right) A still frame from Netflix Kenya’s ‘Free The Whole Storo’ campaign. Source: Twitter/ @netflixkenya

4.2.1 Localism visual cues include:

4.2.1.1 Global brands have in the past entered markets as is, imposing their global and irrelevant propositions in new markets. But with Netflix, they created a local ‘Kenyan Netflix’ and launched their campaign dubbed Free the Whole Storo (Fig 7) with a local angle.

4.2.1.2 The short video commercial’s plot first seen on Twitter (Fig. 8) was very authentic and informed on deep insights about Kenyans. It tells the story of how Kenyans abhor people who like preempting a movie before everyone has watched it. These people are known as maspoilers. Loaded with Kenyan sheng, slang and humour, this launch video advertisements plot is narrated by a well-known DJ who hilariously tells mafinyo (fake)

stories about the movie Extraction.

4.2.I.3 Another hyperlocal piece of visual content is the teaser ad they created upon launch. A simple but effective copy line: Ndio kufika hii mtaa. Kenya Tudum? ‘Tudumu’ is a Swahili phrase meaning ‘let us live forever’. This word has a double meaning as it also is the sound that is Netflix’s signature tone when the app comes on, on-screen. As indicated in Fig. 9 a., b., and c., this ad’s animated stylization prominently shows the Kenyan flag colours (black, red, green, and white). Any Kenyan would recognize the colours and stop to watch the ad.



Fig 9. a), b) and c). Transitions of Netflix Kenya teaser ad. Source: Twitter/ @netflixkenya

4.2.I.4 So obsessed about building brand equity for Netflix Kenya, that they contracted and dictated Kenya’s most famous movie commentator, DJ Afro, to always start with a trademark soundbite, ‘Olllllllright, Asante sana’ every time he makes a commentary about any movie (@mmnjugTM, 2021).

4.2.I.5 Looking at the entire @NetflixKE Twitter page, one cannot help but notice that not only has the content been thoughtfully crafted in local language but there is also a deliberate effort to focus on crafting content that connects exclusively to Kenyans.

The relationship between fan and brand is so personal and emotive. Content perceived to appealing to an urban Kenyan, is being placed front and center to inform on most if not all their digital marketing strategies. Black and African actors are shared alongside funny Kenyan memes. Fans are interacting with the brand as if it was a real human, commenting and engaging freely. The success of Free the Whole Storo campaign was not just about the aesthetics and branding of the campaign. It’s about giving Kenyans autonomy over their entertainment, and guaranteed enjoyment of the very best content - at zero cost.

Freemium and localism are taken to the next level. Right now if one has an Android phone, one can access up to a quarter of the content from their phone (Chadwick, J. 2021) free of charge. So long as they say, you are Kenyan *damu*.

4.3 H-Town Kids: Embedded localism that entrenches celebrity status and social impact

Good artists borrow, great artists steal – Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)

4.3.1 In celebrity status.

If there was ever an Oscars for teens category for Kenya's most imaginative youthful creators, Huruma Town Kids would scoop the award.

Better known as H-Town Kids, the BBC described them as 'masters of mimicking video and photos'. The talented kids consider themselves as 'actors, dancers, mimics, models, acrobats (@hurumatown80, 2022)'. Their hybridity is evident from the numerous short video retakes, parodies, and recreations. Fig. 10 - 13 showcases their collective passion for performing arts and career aspirations.

Started in 2019, this youthful group has challenged the status quo; the cliché that money is a catalyst to stardom. From a humble background, these teenagers' performances and imitations have made them so famous, that they have a following of over 70,000 followers on Instagram.

From 'politicians to comedians' (Kamau, K. 2019)', they have imitated Larry Madowo, Lupita Nyong'o, Tyler Perry, Donald Trump, Stella Mwangi, DJ Khaled, and even movie stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger. Crafting local works inspired by global influences, we see H-Town Kids continuously uploading interesting iterations of their performance on social media. The delight is to see how the teenagers manage to pull off a scene by creating makeshift props, costumes, and choreographing an act that is a near-perfect replica of the original act.

Stellar acting skills are juxtaposed with imaginative (at time humourous) costume and set design. H-Town Kids use whatever material is at their disposal to ensure their act is as close as possible to the original.



Fig 10. (Left) Mimic of pop artiste Stella Mwangi, Fig 11. (Right) Mimic of a music band, Sauti Sol album cover for 'Midnight Train'. Source: Instagram/@hurumatown80



Fig 12. (Left) Mimic of former USA president, Donald Trump. Fig. 13. (Right) Mimic of 2021 Olympic 'Team Kenya'. Source: Instagram/@hurumatown80

So entertaining has their work been that they have attracted global recognition from DJ Khaled who expressed love and admiration for their works.

Embedded in their work is visual design localism. H-Town Kids has been able to take a foreign product, reinterpret it, repackage it in own local context - in new entertaining and inspiring ways.

4.3.2. In social impact

These teenagers reside in Huruma. Huruma is a Nairobi slum 'that sits on 0.12 acres at the margin of Karura forest and is famed for being a chang'aa (illicit brew) den (Kamau, K. 2019)'. On the BBC, one of the H-Town Kids, Morgan had this to say:

I've learnt a lot in this group. I've learnt to focus on the good and not the bad. You bring your mind here, make friends and do things together. Because an idle mind is the devil's workshop. If I was out there, I would be doing the wrong things. When you are out there, people can influence you to go and steal. This group helps you to be a great actor.

Being part of this group has helped these kids stay away from vices such as robbery and alcohol abuse. Acting has in a sense been their 'saviour'. Transforming their lives, bringing hope, and engaging their young minds. This is proof that visual arts have the power to influence positive impact in the community.

4.3.3. Localism visual cues include:

Their contributions in the visual arts are not only informed from a 'glocal' lens but also informed on their talents, abilities, lifestyle, cultural nuances, and stylization which they apply to mirror the more sophisticated ones they see on the digital media. 3 of the 4 principles of sustainism proposed by Diakrousi and de Moor (2011) come to the fore - sharing, localism, and connectedness. From making props from

rudimentary items, collaborative role play, ‘making do’ for costuming, and props – all these are within the tenets of localism.

4.3.3.1 H-Town Kids design costumes by drawing inspiration from what is found in their local surroundings, as suggested by Samuel R. Delany in Dery, M. (2002) article, H-Towns acts, use ‘imaginary paraphernalia of science fiction that historically have functioned as “social signs” - signs people learned to read very quickly. They signaled technology’. Unconsciously, H-Town Kids works are also informed by Afrofuturism which hints at ‘black speculative imagination, and the mashup of different elements to show Africa’s future possibilities (Lubano, T.N. 2022)’. An affirmation and celebration of African ingenuity are evident.

4.3.3.1 With brassy metal substituted for scrap wood, fake flowers substituting fresh bouquets, bedsheets substituting luxury white fabric, H-Town Kids are master alternaters, repurposing found ‘trash’ or refurbishing old items to make new prop elements and costumes for their acts. Their hybridity in imaginative styling is commendable as they try and recreate hi-tech scenes with commonplace materials - representing our local heritage in new ways.

5.0 ANALYSIS

Below is a summary (Table 1) indicating some of the characteristics of Kenyan localism in visual design.

Localism Characteristics	Visual Design Expressions and Philosophies
Nuanced humor	Copy, comics, animation, language, innate in model/ character, audiovisual styling, voice-over, imitations, mimicry, renditions, memes, signs, symbols, inner/hidden meanings
User generated content	Copy, voice-over, audio-visual content created or edited by fans, trending hashtags, memes, commentary e.g. (re) tweets, comments, emojis, memes
Local language: colloquial, <i>sheng</i> , <i>Swaenglish</i> , mother-tongue	Direct translations, copy, voice-over, typography, imitations, mimicry, spin-offs, translations, memes, quotes, proverbs, poems, spoken word, catchy phrases, signs, symbolism
Authentic imagery, footage or illustrations (normally roughly edited but uncontrived or not ‘salesy’)	Kenyan wananchi (local) images or references, snapshots from phones, past photographs, local newspaper/ magazine clippings, screenshot user-generated content, retouched/re-edited to add local relevance in imagery, nostalgia/ heritage imagery, soundbites, symbolism and totems
Geographical references	Colours, flags, scenic landscapes, maps, landmarks and monuments, patriotic sentiments, national references motifs, emblems and symbols

Community/ Networks	Groupings, manifestos, shared ethos, uniformity, proportionality, costume, connectedness, neighborliness, ceremonies, influencer marketing, celebrity status, cult, peer power, influencer following, fanbases and fan pages, collaborative cultures, co-creation, social design, circular design, inclusive design, universal design, human-centered design
Nostalgia, reflections of the past	Celebrating childhood times, old photographs, music or art, technology paraphernalia, past inventions and gadgets, and ' <i>zilizopendwa</i> '
Spontaneity	Unedited, reedited, unrehearsed, unrefined communication in both audio and visual content

Table 1. Characteristics of Kenyan localism in visual design. Source: Lubano, T. N. (2022)

6.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the three examples and Table. 1 above, it is evident that localism in visual design is redefining Kenya's digital landscape. Interactions are becoming more personalized, possess granular detail of cultural nuance, infuse community inputs, and or embed 'local' culture and language in their executions to deliver authentic and meaningful interactions.

Localism is also experienced in diverse interconnected layers – connections are made online and/or offline, at the community level, fanbase level, neighborhood, county, country, regional, and even global level.

We are also seeing pronounced cases of support for the familiar and support for local businesses (#shoplocal). Power seems to rest with the community, brands are just but the enablers.

The human-centered design approach is informing localism in visual design. Brands are realizing that to influence behavior at scale, one must not speak or communicate to an 'imaginary' person, but rather speak with an authentic voice that resonates with the lifestyle and aspirations of the targeted audience. The more genuine the content, the more eyeballs one attracts and consequently the greater the conversion and brand loyalty one receives. Communication (and the visual design cues embedded) are hyper-targeted at local people to solve local issues - designing 'with' rather than 'for' communities. Indeed, visual design in Kenya's digital landscape has come of age, bringing with it, a deeper kind of interconnectedness that links the local to the global in novel ways. Forget aesthetics. Today, it's about driving shared value.

7.0 RECOMMENDATION

Just like in the rest of the whole world, Africa is living in a world where humans are interconnected from the 'web'. More research needs to be done to unpack the manifestations and impact of localism (and the sustainist paradigm) inherent in Africa's creative economy. This will in turn inform on new and better ways of tackling complex issues such as climate change, predictions of the future work, commerce, and social interactions.

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