

How Audience Reaction to *The 5th Estate* Vlogs Aid in The Construction of Mutahi Ngunyi's Identity as an Authoritative Political Analyst

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Abstract

This study investigated one of Kenya's foremost political commentary vlogs – *The 5th Estate* as a rich site on how multimodal resources are marshaled by Mutahi Ngunyi, the vlog's creator and political analyst, to construct the identity of an authoritative political analyst. Whereas there are several studies on identity construction on social media platforms, little research on identity construction focusing specifically on vlogging exist. More so, there is scanty investigation of identity construction strategies used by vloggers who specialise in political commentary. Using the Systemic Functional – Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) approach, the research investigated how audience reaction aid in the construction of individual's identity. The research adopted a qualitative perspective and more specifically a descriptive-interpretive design. Data which included vlogs posted on *The 5th Estate* since its establishment on 19th February, 2019 to date constituted the population of study from which four most popular vlogs were sampled. Data for research was collected, transcribed and analysed using content analysis technique. Knowledge generated by this study is expected to fill the existing gaps in political communications and new media research concerning identity construction in social media. The study could also be useful to politicians, political influencers and government agents who may want to adopt vlogging to communicate to their audience efficiently and effectively. The study concluded that audience reaction plays an important role in shaping Identity of an individual by affirmation of the message, use of descriptive words that describe the author, or titles ascribed to the author.

Keywords: Identity, identity construction, political analyst, vlogging, New media.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The concept of identity construction has gained much interest in recent times just like other social science concepts such as communication, media, new media, technology and digitization. Important to note is the fact that identity formation encompasses an individual's everyday activities (Orsatti and Riemer, 2015; 7). In this sense, identity is created not only consciously but also unconsciously. An individual may deliberately construct their identity by choosing how to behave through communication with an intention of conveying a particular identity. On the other hand, communication of particular ideas, philosophies, standpoints, likes and dislikes, behaviour, may convey a certain identity without an individual's knowledge. More so, unconscious identity constructions may occur through an individual's unconscious behaviour expressed through their daily activities. As Orsatti and Riemer (2015) put

it, the “bigger part of individual's identity formation is unreflective in the sense that conscious thinking or deliberation does not precede or accompany it”.

This study focused on how the audience's reaction to *The 5th Estate* vlogs aid in construction of identity of Mutahi Ngunyi as an authoritative political analyst. Mutahi Ngunyi is a renowned fearless and incisive political analyst. He worked as a political columnist with the *Sunday Nation Newspaper* since 2002 until late 2010 when his services were suspended. He specializes in predicting electoral outcomes some of which have come to pass. He disseminates his political commentaries through *The 5th Estate* vlogs, which were aired on K24 Television on Sundays at 9.20pm during the 2017, and 2022 general election. He announced the launch of *'The 5th Estate TV'* on his twitter handle on March 20th, 2019. The station airs on free to air Channels (PANG), Startimes Channel 186 and Gotv Channel 888.

His career path can be described as a transition from a newspaper columnist, to a vlogger and finally an integration of vlogging and mainstream media (K24 television, *The 5th Estate TV*, and The 5th Estate YouTube Channel).

The focus was based on the understanding that identity is best constructed through discourse and this is realised mainly through footing and narrating. A narrated story unfolds the identity of an individual. Language plays a central role. Language mediates interactions and as such, it offers people opportunity to symbolically cue their identities.

2.0. EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

Every individual who creates content has innate desire to get feedback from their respective audience and Mutahi Ngunyi is not an exception. Individuals look out for feedback from their audience with the hope that others will view them in “congruence with how they internally identify themselves” (Caffrey, 2017). However, this is not always the case as audiences may either affirm the presented identity or reconstruct it. The presented identity can be endorsed, reconstructed or rejected altogether. Identity construction is a social process, and the identifier is equally important. Handapangoda (2015) sums it up when he asserts that identity is only established when there is a coincidence of placement, endorsement of a particular identity to an individual by others, and announcement, a claim by the individual to have possessed that particular identity. This research seeks to ascertain whether Mutahi Ngunyi’s audience affirm his identity as an authoritative political analyst as conveyed through *The 5th Estate*.

The 5th Estate, is a YouTube channel, created by Mutahi Ngunyi, dedicated solely to political discourse. It was established on 19th February 2015. It is a professionally created collection of vlogs that convey political messages. It boasts of over 136,732 subscribers and has attracted over 18, 596, 937 views. Political vlogs are posted on *The 5th Estate* every Saturday and aired on K24 television on Sunday at 9.20 pm and *The 5th Estate* television Channel. Through *The 5th Estate* political vlogs, Mutahi Ngunyi conveys an identity of an authoritative and incisive political analyst who specializes in predicting electoral outcomes some of which have come to pass.

This research adopted Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) theory as formulated by O’Halloran in 2008. This is because unlike other approaches, SF-MDA offers a highly systematic perspective of capturing the various aspects of multimodal communication, as well as greater systematic approach to integrating the visual images and linguistics.

The target population for this study was *The 5th Estate* political vlogs posted by Mutahi Ngunyi since it

was established 24th February, 2015 a YouTube channel until now when it has been transformed into a Television channel. The total number of vlogs posted since the establishment of *The 5th Estate* constituted the population from which the sample was derived.

The researcher used Google search engine to access the YouTube website and then *The 5th Estate* YouTube channel. All the vlogs on *The 5th Estate* were sorted according to popularity. The study utilized criterion based purposive sampling. In this case, vlogs on *The 5th Estate* with over 250,000 views were considered to form a sample size. These vlogs were downloaded and coded for identification purposes.

Dataset of YouTube viewer responses of vlogs from *The 5th Estate* was downloaded from the comment section of each of the sampled vlogs. This aided in ascertaining audience role in identity construction. Viewers’ comments were analysed on the basis of positive/negative comments, arguments for/arguments against, likes/dislikes, encouragement/discouragement, agree/disagree and support/oppose. The total number of comments per vlog was also considered besides the total number of viewership.

In terms of viewership, this research looked at a huge viewership attraction as an endorsement of Mutahi Ngunyi by online audiences.

3.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings of the study on how audience reaction aid in construction of identity were discussed in two steps; first the findings of how audience reacted to the *5th Estate* vlogs were analysed, followed by their comprehensive discussion, from which the researcher drew conclusions.

3.1. RESULTS

Letter to Uhuru on why Raila is winning is the most popular vlog in *The 5th Estate*, attracting 388, 620 views. The vlog attracted 1,300 likes and 46 comments. Comments were varied in content although many viewers were in support of Mutahi Ngunyi’s sentiments as expressed in the vlog. Kevin, a viewer, in his agreement with Mutahi Ngunyi asserted;

“I especially like the way that these complex perspectives are broken down to bite-size. It almost gives me an impression that I might very well have been a part of the discussion. Then these were the guys selected to present our resolution. I think this forum could be one of the ways forward. Try now to guide us into building a modern framework for Kenya instead of always focusing on these two guys. Kudos and keep them coming”.

Another viewer, Anthony M. Stated that Mutahi Ngunyi’s prediction had proven right most of the time. He says:

"I highly recommend this political dissection...mutahi has been proven right most of the time...i believe every nation on the verge of change goes through birthpangs..first and second world war gave way to Nations like Israel and many others Kenya being among them...when Kenya has gone through this shaking..let's not waste a good opportunity".

Michael, in his comments praises Mutahi Ngunyi's work and goes ahead to suggest that Mutahi Ngunyi should be appointed the President's advisor. While agreeing with Njihia, another viewer, Nicky Njoro describes Mutahi Ngunyi as 'wicked smart'. He wonders whether Kenyan politicians watch and learn from him.

James, another viewer, describes his experience with Mutahi Ngunyi's work. He states that Mutahi Ngunyi's work take him by storm as the hypotheses are 'made out of space or in heaven'. Hon. Kimani Mbuthia, agrees that 'Uhuru Kenyatta is chasing after the tail' and appreciates Mutahi Ngunyi's advice to him. Josphat Mutahi goes further to urge the president to subscribe to *The 5th Estate* when he states because it is a haven of learning. On the contrary, Niva Muchanja disagrees with Mutahi Ngunyi's analysis focusing on President Uhuru and Raila Odinga only when he asks why Mutahi Ngunyi does not consider other aspirants as potential Heads of State.

Was Nkaissery Assassinated? Who Benefits? Is the second most popular vlog on *The 5th Estate*, it attracted 361, 980 views; 1, 400 likes, 48 comments all of which are in support of the identity conveyed. One viewer, Kobo, states that he always hits the like button before he even watches the videos. He appraises Mutahi Ngunyi for great job. Miss Kashy, another viewer, also agrees with the messages in the vlog and urges Mutahi Ngunyi to educate people that politics is just a "game of power". While identifying with Mutahi Ngunyi, Lyne Gatibas and Glen Luvai claim that Mutahi Ngunyi read their mind. Lyne adds that the vlog stated exactly what she had been thinking about while Glen says that the vlog stated exactly what he had been telling his colleagues. Another viewer, Nahashon Waweru, also agrees and urges Mutahi Ngunyi to keep up with good work. He states that he always watches *The 5th Estate*, without missi even a single episode.

On the other hand, Gordon, a viewer, differs with the rest of the viewers and dismiss Mutahi Ngunyi as "Nonsense".

Letter to Ruto, Stolen Copy by Raila attracted 281, 698 views making it the third most popular vlog on *The 5th Estate*. The vlog has 762 likes and ten comments nine of which agree with the message while one disagree. Leyan Kibet, a viewer, underscores the ability of Mutahi Ngunyi to correctly predict events when she she refers to him as a political analyst, who made predictions that

have come to pass five years later. Moses Kamau, another viewer also agrees with Mutahi Ngunyi's prediction ability as they always come to pass.

No Election, No Raila: Uhuru strategy to finish Raila is the fourth most popular vlog on *The 5th Estate* with 265, 366 views. It attracted 1, 200 likes, 68 comments out of which 61 are in support of the message communicated. Viewers have expressed their support of Ngunyi on this vlog in various ways. A viewer by the name Frank Luka describes Mutahi Ngunyi as a "critical thinker" in his two words comment. A viewer calling himself Dee Fox adds his voice to the conversation as he refers to Mutahi Ngunyi's work as Superb analysis. He adds his opinion regarding the Supreme Court nullification of the 2017 general election calling for fresh election.

In attempt to portray how eager the viewers wait for the weekly release of *The 5th Estate*, Tabby Wothaya says that he always waits for *The 5th Estate*, and "it never disappoints" and Evelyne describes it as the 'best video ever'.

3.2. DISCUSSION

This section has shown that audience reaction is important in establishing an individual's identity. Comments on *The 5th Estate* show that the audience agrees with messages being conveyed through the vlogs. The audience repeatedly use words such as superb, wow, nice, precise, indeed, interesting, great, good, excellent, correct, sense, agree, absolutely, and word phrases such as very true, has come to pass, you never disappoint, best video ever, I agree, well analysed, very precise, it is good, good points, I like, 100% true, good stuff, its only getting better, good prediction, great work, quite a nice piece, very true, great insight, spot on, words full of wisdom, great piece, well said, am liking the facts, couldn't agree more, interesting argument to express their agreement with the contents of the vlogs. However, there are few dissenting voices who expressed their disagreement with Mutahi Ngunyi's message. They used such words as nonsense and disagree.

Closely related to agreement with the message in the vlogs is the audience's acknowledgement that Mutahi Ngunyi's predictions come to realisation. To express this, the audience use such word phrases as; 100 percent true, this has come to pass, it has come to pass, you predicted this right, and good predictions.

Some audience admitted to being taught new knowledge by Mutahi Ngunyi as they expressed their satisfaction of being knowledgeable now than before. This category of viewers used such words as 'thanks for the insight' and 'now I know'.

There are viewers who sought to describe Mutahi Ngunyi by ascribing him names and titles. In this sense, such names and titles as wicked smart, respect

Ngunyi, professor, superb analyst, critical thinker and good predictor were used to describe him.

4.0. CONCLUSION

Data analysed shows that audience reaction plays an important role in shaping Identity of an individual. The comments which may be made of affirmation of the message, descriptive words that describe the author, or titles ascribed to the author serve to assert an individual's identity. This is made possible by the use of social media platforms such as vlogging which enable the use of multimodal strategies that help one communicate their identity effectively.

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