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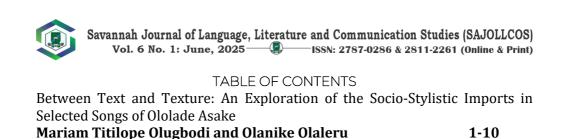
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SECTION B: LITERATURE

A Comparative Multimodal Discourse Analysis of MTN and Airtel's Instagram Advertising Strategies

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Abstract

Advertising in the digital era has evolved into a complex interplay of multimodal resources, with social media platforms like Instagram serving as fertile grounds for strategic brand communication and identity construction. As part of this communicative shift, African telecommunication brands are increasingly leveraging multimodal tools to position themselves competitively in the consumer market. This study investigates how two dominant telecommunication companies—MTN and Airtel—utilize Instagram advertisements to encode and disseminate brand ideologies through visual and verbal semiotics. A total of six purposively selected Instagram posts—three per brand—constituted the dataset for the study. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar and operating within the broader framework of multimodal discourse analysis, the research focuses on representational meaning and the deployment of processes, participants, and semiotic resources such as color, gaze, typography, gesture, framing, and hashtags. The analysis reveals contrasting communicative strategies reflective of each brand's ideological orientation. MTN's posts are marked by cultural localization, vibrant yellow palettes, inclusive visual compositions, and collective identity cues that promote belonging, optimism, and social connectedness. Conversely, Airtel adopts a minimalist aesthetic dominated by red hues, sleek visual arrangements, and aspirational narratives that foreground individual success, technological advancement, and innovation. Both brands integrate intersemiotic layering to evoke emotional resonance and direct consumer attention toward specific actions and values. The study argues that Instagram functions not merely as a marketing channel, but as a semiotic battleground where corporate identities, consumer desires, and market ideologies are contested and consolidated through carefully orchestrated multimodal ensembles. By foregrounding how African brands negotiate meaning, visibility, and consumer engagement through multimodal strategies, the research contributes to the expanding scholarship on digital advertising and visual discourse in Linguistics. Ultimately, it underscores the persuasive power of multimodal communication in shaping audience perception, brand loyalty, and consumer behavior in an increasingly visual and participatory media culture.

Background to the Study

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies and social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the landscape of advertising and consumer engagement. Among these platforms, Instagram stands out as a visually-driven, algorithmically-curated space where brands actively construct and perform identities, narrate stories, and connect with audiences through multimodal means. With over 2 billion monthly active users globally, and a rapidly growing user base across Africa, Instagram has become a powerful site for corporate branding, especially in the highly competitive telecommunications sector. In the African context, telecommunication brands such as MTN and Airtel have transcended their roles as mere service providers to become cultural icons that influence how people connect, communicate, and perceive progress. Both brands have invested heavily in digital marketing campaigns, using Instagram not only to promote products and services but also to shape socio-cultural narratives around connectivity, empowerment, and innovation. These campaigns are far from neutral; they are strategically crafted multimodal texts that draw on a complex interplay of visual, textual, spatial, and interactive semiotic resources to appeal to diverse consumer bases.

Despite the ubiquity of such digital advertisements, scholarly attention to their multimodal construction and persuasive power—particularly in African contexts—remains limited. While existing literature in marketing and communication has examined brand engagement and social media strategies, few studies adopt a multimodal discourse analytical lens to interrogate how meaning is constructed across semiotic modes in corporate advertising. Moreover, comparative studies that analyze the visual rhetorics and semiotic positioning of competing brands within the same digital space are conspicuously scarce.

This study addresses these gaps by undertaking a comparative multimodal analysis of Instagram advertisements by MTN and Airtel. It seeks to uncover how these brands construct identity, engage audiences, and communicate values through carefully orchestrated multimodal ensembles. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of Visual Grammar, the study not only explores the formal features of digital ads but also situates them within broader discourses of consumerism, cultural representation, and corporate ideology in Africa. In doing so, it contributes to the expanding field of multimodal discourse studies, while offering critical insights into the strategies used by African brands to navigate and negotiate visibility, loyalty, and meaning in the digital marketplace.

Statement of the Problem

This study investigates how African telecommunication brands MTN and Airtel use multimodal resources on

Instagram to shape consumer perception, brand identity, and cultural relevance. While social media advertising increasingly combines images, text, emojis, color, and layout to persuade and inform, existing research often overlooks the semiotic strategies behind these ads—especially in African contexts. The study identifies a gap in understanding how competing brands construct distinct communicative identities through multimodal discourse. By applying a comparative multimodal discourse analysis, the research aims to uncover how MTN and Airtel strategically engage audiences and embed meaning within their digital advertising, contributing to broader discussions of branding, consumer culture, and visual communication in Africa.

Objectives of the Study

i. To analyse the multimodal resources used in MTN and Airtel's Instagram advertisements and how they construct meaning through semiotic resource,

ii. compare the branding strategies of MTN and Airtel, examining how each brand constructs identity, ideology, and consumer appeal through multimodal discourse, and;

iii. explore the socio-cultural values and narratives embedded in the advertisements,

highlighting how African telecommunication brands engage with digital audiences in a visually driven marketing landscape.

Significance

This study is significant both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing field of multimodal discourse analysis. It provides critical insight into how meaning, identity, and ideology are constructed through the interplay of visual and textual elements on Instagram. Practically, the study offers valuable guidance to digital marketers, brand strategists, and media professionals on how to craft culturally resonant and persuasive advertising content for African audiences. Additionally, by analyzing Instagram ads a texts, the study sheds light on how such content reflects and shapes contemporary social values, consumer behavior, and identity formation in an increasingly visual and connected world.

Literature Review

In the evolving landscape of digital advertising, Instagram has become a prominent platform for multimodal brand communication, enabling organizations to leverage visual, textual, spatial, and interactive modes to construct and disseminate persuasive narratives. This development has been critically explored through the lens of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), with scholars emphasizing

the platform's affordances for semiotic complexity and audience engagement (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Jewitt, 2009; Machin, 2012).

Multimodality and Visual Grammar

A foundational theoretical framework in MDA is Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design, which conceptualizes visual communication through three metafunctions: representational, interpersonal, and compositional meanings, derived from systemic functional linguistics. This framework posits that images are not merely illustrative but are structured systems of meaning independent or interdependent on language. These metafunctions allow for a granular analysis of how visual elements such as gaze, color, framing, and salience function communicatively and ideologically.

Complementing this, the broader field of social semiotics positions all communicative practices as socially situated, emphasizing the role of culture and context in shaping the use of semiotic resources (van Leeuwen, 2005; Jewitt, 2009; Bezemer & Kress, 2016). This approach is particularly suited to analyzing Instagram content, where meanings emerge from the dynamic interplay of design, aesthetics, and interactivity.

Multimodal Branding and Digital Advertisements

Modern branding increasingly depends on multimodal storytelling, where corporate identity and consumer engagement are constructed through coordinated semiotic choices across platforms (Forceville, 2008). Color, typography, layout, and symbolic imagery all contribute to a brand's affective and ideological positioning (van Leeuwen, 2011). For instance, the use of color as a semiotic resource—yellow for energy and optimism in MTN's case, or red for urgency and innovation in Airtel's—can signal brand values and cultural resonance (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002).

Furthermore, brands on Instagram adopt narrative and interpersonal strategies to forge emotional connections, often embedding call-to-action cues, aspirational themes, and interactive elements such as hashtags and comments. This aligns with research that emphasizes emotional branding and participatory marketing as core to digital communication (Machin, 2021).

Instagram as a Multimodal Platform

Instagram's interface encourages a high degree of modal density and orchestration (Bezemer & Kress, 2016), allowing brands to communicate complex messages through combinations of static images, text overlays, filters, emojis, captions, and user-generated content. The platform's visual dominance makes it fertile ground for visual rhetoric and identity performance, where users and brands alike engage in image-based self-representation and narrative construction (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Studies have shown

that Instagram is not merely a conduit for marketing but a semiotic battleground, where ideologies are embedded in visual discourses and engagement strategies (Suku, 2018). Hashtags, in particular, serve as both indexical and interactive resources—categorizing content, affiliating users with brand communities, and amplifying visibility (Suku, 2025).

African Brand Communication

Advertising in the digital age has evolved into a richly multimodal enterprise, where images, texts, colors, layouts, and other semiotic resources work together to shape consumer perception and behavior. Within this context, multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) has emerged as a critical tool for examining how meaning is constructed and communicated through visual and textual strategies. Several studies have applied this approach to explore branding and persuasion in African telecommunication advertising, with particular attention to MTN and Airtel.

Suku (2018) shifts the analytical focus from Halliday's "clause as representation" to "image as representation," drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design. Her study of MTN's Instagram advertisements reveals that images function independently of verbal text and employ both narrative and conceptual processes to frame MTN as a solution to societal problems. The analysis foregrounds visual meaning-making in digital African advertising but

could benefit from more methodological depth and broader comparative insights.

Similarly, Adeagbo and Alaba (2022) apply Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar to MTN advertisements, with an emphasis on Nigerian cultural contexts. Their findings show that MTN's multimodal strategies—especially gaze, body language, visual metaphors, and strategic text placement—build emotional connections and convey social themes such as inclusivity and community. Importantly, their study addresses the underrepresentation of African contexts in global advertising research and underscores the culturally grounded nature of MTN's brand messaging.

From a regional perspective, Bertrand et al. (2022) examine MTN and Orange advertisements in Cameroon's Tribune newspaper. Using a combined framework of MDA and Critical Discourse Studies, the authors identify visual and linguistic tools—including framing, salience, gaze, and modality—used to manipulate and guide consumer responses. The study also addresses sociocultural and ideological dimensions, such as gender, beauty, and language politics, recommending the integration of local languages and balanced gender representation to enhance audience engagement.

While these studies offer insight into MTN's strategies, Amah et al. (2017) broaden the scope by analyzing telecom advertisements across

multiple platforms, including YouTube, social media, and TV. Their thematic analysis identifies emotional appeals (e.g., love, humor, music) and rational appeals (e.g., service quality, pricing) as key strategies in shaping consumer behavior in Nigeria. Their findings support the claim that emotional resonance remains a powerful tool in brand positioning and market retention.

Focusing on Airtel, Fomukong (2021) employs a multimodal-stylistic semiotic approach to analyze Airtel Nigeria's 4G visual commercials. Her study shows how metaphors and multimodal composition create stark contrasts between 3G and 4G, framing Airtel's products positively through familiar daily experiences. The use of visual metaphors, clear dichotomies, and shared cultural cues demonstrates Airtel's strategic use of visual storytelling to influence consumer choice and promote brand identity.

Uthman (2022) extends this line of inquiry by focusing on MTN's Facebook advertising. Using Social Semiotic Theory, he finds that visuals provide emotional tone while text delivers clarity, showing that meaning-making emerges from the interaction of both modes. His study also affirms the role of shared cultural knowledge in decoding advertisements, reinforcing the importance of culturally anchored multimodal strategies.

Despite the valuable insights these studies provide into the visual and semiotic strategies of telecom advertising in African contexts, a key gap remains: comparative analyses of Instagram advertising strategies between leading African brands are limited. While MTN and Airtel have been studied individually across platforms, there is a lack of systematic, side-by-side analysis of how these two brands employ multimodal strategies specifically on Instagram—a platform that emphasizes visual storytelling and interactivity.

Furthermore, Instagram's unique compositional affordances—such as image filters, story formats, hashtags, captions, emojis, and comment engagement—are underexplored in these existing MDA studies. This leaves open important questions about how MTN and Airtel construct brand identities, differentiate themselves, and connect with digitally savvy Nigerian audiences through the aesthetic, interactive, and persuasive affordances of Instagram.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study is anchored in the principles of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), drawing specifically on Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar framework (2006). While Visual Grammar comprises three interrelated metafunctions—representational, interpersonal, and compositional—this study focuses primarily on the representational metafunction, which explores what is visually depicted, including participants, processes (actions or events), and circumstances. The representational metafunction is

central to understanding how meaning is encoded in the visual content of Instagram advertisements, particularly how MTN and Airtel portray individuals, objects, and actions to convey brand identity, socio-cultural values, and persuasive intent.

By limiting the scope to representational elements, the study investigates the narrative structures (e.g., actional and reactional processes) and conceptual structures (e.g., classification, analytical, and symbolic processes) within the visual compositions of the ads. This focus provides insight into how brand stories are constructed, and how cultural and ideological messages are embedded in what is shown, rather than how the viewers are positioned or how the visual layout is organized.

In addition, the study draws on principles of social semiotics, which foreground the idea that all modes of communication, including images, are socially and culturally situated. This perspective enhances the analysis by situating the representational choices made by MTN and Airtel within broader African cultural narratives, media consumption practices, and marketing ideologies. Through this lens, the study reveals how the visual representations in the ads are shaped by and contribute to the construction of meaning in a specific socio-cultural context.

The research adopts a qualitative study design, focusing on Instagram as a multimodal platform that combines images, captions, hashtags, emojis, layout, and other visual resources. A total of 6 advertisements (3 each from MTN and Airtel) were purposively selected from posts published between January and December 2024. The selection was based on relevance, visual richness, and engagement level (likes and comments). These posts were captured via screenshots and archived with accompanying text content for analysis. The data were analyzed using Kress and van Leeuwen's representational metafunction, focusing specifically on narrative and conceptual structures. For each advertisement, the analysis explored what was depicted—such as participants, actions, settings, and products—and how these elements functioned to convey processes, roles, and symbolic meanings. Attention was given to how narrative processes (e.g., action, reaction) and conceptual representations (symbolism) were visually constructed through elements like vectors, positioning, and symbolic attributes. A comparative analysis between MTN and Airtel advertisements was conducted to identify recurring patterns and key differences in how each brand visually represents people, ideas, and values in crafting their promotional messages.

Analysis
Action Process MTN

Participants and Process

The image exemplifies a narrative representation, specifically an action process, as defined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). A clearly defined vector is formed by the outstretched arms of the two participants, establishing a transactional action process. The male participant, from whom the vector originates, functions as the Actor, while the female participant, toward whom the vector is directed, serves as the Goal. The directionality of the vector—visually articulated through the extended arm and the object (money) in hand—constructs the action as purposeful and goal-oriented, symbolizing the transfer of a tangible object from one participant to another. This bidirectional configuration not only denotes physical movement but semantically encodes the concept of exchange, a core message of the advertisement. The gesture of holding the money reinforces the processual identity of the action, functioning both as a vectorial element and a semiotic resource that emphasizes the functional nature of the transaction. The structure typifies a transactional narrative, where the Actor performs an action upon a Goal, visually enacting the brand's promise of service facilitation, convenience, or value exchange. By deploying such a narrative structure, the advertisement anchors its communicative intent in a visually dynamic process, highlighting agency, directionality, and the relational role between participants. The action process thus becomes a powerful semiotic vehicle through which the brand signifies transactional ease, accessibility, and social engagement.

Action Process Airtel

Participants and Process

The Airtel 4G data advertisement prominently exemplifies a narrative structure dominated by an action process, constructed through the dynamic interaction between the represented participants. The male figure is clearly positioned as the Actor, with the mobile phone in his hand functioning as the Goal—the object being acted upon. This transactional action is visually realized by the vector formed through the positioning of the man's arm and hand, signifying control, agency, and technological engagement. The phone, although an inanimate object, plays a central role in the narrative, acting as the recipient of the action and symbolizing the core product being promoted. A secondary transactional process is embedded within the primary action, realized through a reactional process. The eyeline vector drawn from the female participant's gaze toward the phone identifies her as the Reactor, and the phone as the Phenomenon. This reactional structure—"the woman looking at the phone"—serves to reinforce viewers attention on the

Goal, further emphasizing the phone's significance. However, this process is visually subordinated: although the female figure is large in scale and visually prominent, her gaze functions as a minor process nested within the dominant action structure initiated by the male Actor. This compositional hierarchy suggests that the woman's reaction serves to amplify the significance of the male's action, rather than operate independently.

The scale and salience of the male Actor's gesture, coupled with the central positioning of the phone, constructs the action process as the primary vector of meaning. The action is dynamic and visually explicit, anchoring the viewer's interpretation around usage, access, and digital empowerment through the Airtel 4G service. Although peripheral to the action structure, the verbal text—"More affordable, more data"—functions in tandem with the visual narrative. Bold typography, the large "10,000" figure, and the saturated red branding work as salient visual cues that enhance brand recognition and call attention to value. However, the core

ideational content of the image resides in the actional engagement between human participants and the technological product, foregrounding usability and product-centered interaction as the key communicative goal.

Reaction process MTN

Participants and Process

The image presents a complex multidimensional representational structure, combining reactional, actional, and symbolic processes in a layered narrative composition. At the core is a non-transactional reactional process, realized through an eyeline vector emanating from a human participant (Reacter) directed toward another participant or object of attention (Phenomenon), which constitutes a visual proposition. This reactional structure forms the dominant narrative clause, positioning the Reacter as a viewer within the scene and guiding the real viewer's gaze toward the focal point. Simultaneously, an actional process unfolds through the dynamic bodily movement of a basketball player, whose stretched arm forms a directional vector toward the ball, functioning as the Goal. This interaction visually encodes intentional movement, force, and goal-directed action, reinforcing a sense of energy and performance. Notably, the presence of a deleted Actor—implied by an outstretched arm from outside the frame—adds a layer of narrative ambiguity and interactivity, drawing the viewer into the implied action beyond the visible space. This construction suggests a transactional action process that is only partially realized, thereby inviting the viewer to infer the broader context of the scene. In parallel, a symbolic process is embedded within the same visual field. A circular motif (e.g., a spotlight or background design) functions as a symbolic attribute, with the player or object it surrounds acting as the Carrier. This symbolic structure attributes meaning beyond the literal action—perhaps signifying focus, excellence, or aspiration—thereby

contributing to the construction of identity and thematic emphasis.

Together, these layered processes form a hierarchically structured composition, with the reactional process operating as the primary clause, while the actional and symbolic processes function as secondary or embedded clauses. The integration of these processes creates a rich multimodal orchestration, where gaze, action, and symbolic framing coalesce to produce a persuasive and ideologically loaded visual message.

Reaction process Airtel

Participants and Process

The figure under analysis is the front cover of a Christmas-themed Instagram "story" shared by a well-known footballer's family, which—on first glance—appears to be a festive felicitation. However, a closer multimodal analysis reveals a deeper promotional function anchored in representational choices that foreground the Airtel brand. The image is constructed around a bidirectional transactional reactional process, wherein all visible family members act as Reacters, collectively directing their eyeline vectors toward a shared Phenomenon—a mobile phone. This reactional structure dominates the representational configuration, visually conveying joint attention and engagement, and reinforcing the notion of family unity mediated through digital connectivity.

The Phenomenon, which forms the focal point of both the participants' and the viewers' gaze, is semantically elaborated through the verbal text embedded in the image: "How are you spending your last Friday of the year?" This rhetorical question functions not only as a seasonal reflection but as a subtle brand proposition, implying that the family's moment of togetherness is facilitated by Airtel's digital services. Hence, the reactional process does more than depict a moment of watching—it encodes a broader message about Airtel's role in enabling shared experiences and seamless digital communication. The communicative weight of the image, therefore, shifts from festive greeting

to brand-centric narrative, subverting the initial surface reading. Additionally, a symbolic process is embedded through a curved red design element that encloses the verbal text. This visual motif functions as a symbolic attribute, while the image itself serves as the Carrier, projecting abstract values such as warmth, celebration, and brand identity. The use of Airtel's brand color (red) within this symbolic structure visually reinforces the company's presence and connects the interactive resources of language (written mode) with the interactive resources of image (color, shape, placement). This multimodal synergy strengthens the brand message, rendering the image not only a narrative of familial bonding but also a carefully constructed advertisement.

Overall, the image synthesizes reactional and symbolic processes to construct a multidimensional representational message: one that visually encodes familial intimacy while semantically foregrounding Airtel's functional and emotional appeal. The result is a hybrid communicative act—ostensibly a holiday greeting, but functionally a brand positioning strategy embedded in visual grammar.

Symbolic Process Airtel

Participant and Process

The image under analysis exemplifies a symbolic suggestive process, a sub-type of conceptual representation in which only one participant—the Carrier—is present, and symbolic meaning is evoked not through explicit attributes but through atmospheric and affective cues. Unlike symbolic analytical structures, where meaning is realized through clearly delineated symbolic attributes or objects, the symbolic suggestive image downplays detail in favor of mood, ambiance, and emotional resonance. In this instance, symbolic meaning is constructed through a deliberate

visual abstraction. The colors—dominated by rich, hazy reds—blend into one another without sharp contrasts, while the soft focus and high-contrast lighting reduce the participant(s) to silhouettes or indistinct outlines. 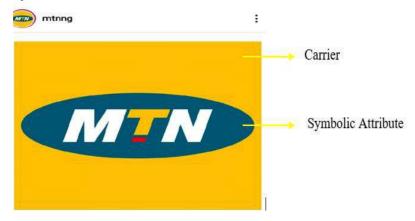This blurring of detail removes specificity, allowing the Carrier to assume a universal or archetypal role, representing not a particular person or event but an essence or internal quality. Such techniques are characteristic of symbolic suggestive processes, which, as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) observe, construct meaning as deriving from within the participant, rather than from externally attached symbols or analytical identifiers.

In this context, the image serves to position the Carrier as a visual metaphor for the intrinsic value and emotional experience associated with watching The Voice Africa, a program sponsored by Airtel. The Carrier becomes a stand-in for the viewer's aspirational self, suggesting that tuning into the show offers not just entertainment but inspiration, transformation, and identity affirmation. The abstract visual environment—enhanced by the saturated red color palette closely associated with Airtel's brand identity—reinforces the ideological alignment between the symbolic mood of the show and the values the brand seeks to communicate: passion, excellence, and pan-African connectivity.

Thus, the symbolic suggestive process in this image operates as a powerful semiotic resource, inviting viewers to interpret the Carrier not as a literal figure but as a symbolic embodiment of potential and emotional resonance, brought to life through Airtel's sponsorship. The image transcends denotative content and constructs a generalized, affectively charged meaning, positioning Airtel not merely as a service provider but as a cultural enabler of shared experiences and expressive identities.

Symbolic Process MTN

Participants and Process

The image under examination is structured around a symbolic conceptual process, characterized by the absence of a vector and the presence of two core participants: the Carrier and the Symbolic Attribute. In this case, the Carrier—a central, foregrounded human participant—stands in isolation against a plain, monochromatic background, while the MTN logo, prominently positioned, functions as the symbolic attribute. The lack of action or eyeline vector shifts the representational focus away from narrative toward identity construction and brand association.

This symbolic structure emphasizes what the Carrier represents rather than what the Carrier does, projecting a timeless and generalized essence. The plain background decontextualizes the scene, enhancing the salience of the symbolic attribute (MTN logo) and placing interpretive weight on the interpersonal dimension of the image. The image's interactional potency is realized through direct visual address and symbolic dominance, where the logo becomes the key site of viewer engagement, functioning not merely as a brand marker but as a semiotic bridge between the viewer and the identity being constructed.

From an interpersonal perspective, the image fosters emotional resonance and symbolic intimacy. The Carrier's posture and expression (if present) are neutral and open, allowing for viewer projection and imaginative participation. The modality structure—particularly the high color saturation and visual clarity—enhances the credibility and intensity of the image, reinforcing a high-modality code that signals brand confidence, clarity, and cultural relevance. The difference between this symbolic representation and more informational visuals, such as maps, lies not in the ideational content—which remains static—but in their interpersonal structuring. The modality features, including background, color use, and logo placement, are carefully orchestrated to evoke emotional alignment and ideological investment.

Overall, this symbolic image functions not to narrate or describe but to position the viewer in relation to the brand, inviting identification with the Carrier and emotional association with the MTN identity. The symbolic attribute (logo) becomes the semiotic anchor through which meaning is conveyed, while the plain backdrop and frontal positioning of the Carrier create a powerful interpersonal connection, constructing the brand as emotionally accessible, ideologically strong, and visually dominant.

Discussion of Findings

The representational analysis of MTN and Airtel Instagram advertisements reveals distinct multimodal strategies in how each brand constructs meaning, identity, and consumer engagement through visual narrative structures.
Action processes in MTN advertisements emphasize

bidirectional, human-to-human transactions situated in familiar service contexts. These interactions highlight communal values, accessibility, and relational trust. In contrast, Airtel deploys unidirectional action structures, where the mobile device becomes the central Goal, aligning with narratives of technological empowerment and individual aspiration.

Reactional processes further differentiate brand ideology. MTN adopts collective gaze vectors—often within family settings—that frame the viewer experience as inclusive and shared, reinforcing unity and social connectivity. Airtel, on the other hand, embeds secondary gaze processes that subtly enhance product centrality while depicting individual curiosity or admiration, aligning with personalized digital experiences.

In terms of symbolic processes, MTN favors symbolic attributive representations, featuring clearly defined Carriers and overt brand symbols (e.g., the MTN logo) to reinforce brand recognition and associative identity. Airtel opts for symbolic suggestive imagery, where emotional atmosphere, abstraction, and aesthetic ambiguity construct affective depth and cultural sophistication, particularly through sponsorship narratives like The Voice Africa.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that both brands utilize representational structures to

project distinct ideological positions: MTN promotes community-oriented, socially grounded branding, while Airtel foregrounds innovation, emotional resonance, and aspirational lifestyles. These visual strategies not only construct brand identities but also shape how audiences interpret and engage with commercial narratives in digital environments.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how multimodal discourse analysis, grounded in Kress and van Leeuwen's representational metafunction, offers critical insights into the meaning-making strategies employed in Instagram advertisements by two of Africa's leading telecommunication brands—MTN and Airtel. Through comparative analysis of narrative structures, it has been shown that both brands deploy visual semiotic resources—particularly action, reactional, and symbolic processes—not merely for aesthetic appeal, but as purposeful tools for constructing brand identity, communicating ideology, and shaping consumer perception.

MTN consistently anchors its representational choices in human-centered, socially embedded narratives that emphasize community, service, and everyday engagement. Its use of symmetrical action and reactional processes and overt symbolic attributes (e.g., logo prominence) reinforces a trustworthy, inclusive brand image. In contrast, Airtel foregrounds

product functionality, technological aspiration, and emotional resonance through asymmetric narrative structures, symbolic suggestiveness, and immersive design aesthetics. These divergent strategies reflect broader ideological positioning: MTN as a facilitator of interpersonal connection and accessibility; Airtel as a driver of digital innovation and individual empowerment.

Overall, the findings affirm that Instagram serves as a semiotic battleground where brands compete not only for consumer attention but also for ideological alignment and cultural relevance. This study contributes to the growing scholarship on multimodal digital marketing in the Global South by highlighting how African brands harness visual grammar to negotiate meaning, engage diverse audiences, and solidify market presence. Future research may expand this analysis to include interactive modalities such as comments, hashtags, and video content to further explore the dynamic interplay of modes in mobile advertising.

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