Identity construction on WhatsApp spaces in Kenya

Gloria A. Ooko
(University of Johannesburg)
(gloriao@uj.ac.za)
Orcid number:0000-0001-9231-7248

Gloria A Ooko (short bio): holds a PHD in Media Studies (University of Witwatersrand-SA); Msc Communication studies (Moi University), Bsc Communication and Public Relations (Moi University). Her research interests include digital politics, technology materiality including artificial intelligence (AI) and how it interacts with the social, decoloniality and participatory cultures in the Global South.

This article is derived from a chapter in my unpublished PhD thesis. I have previously published one article from another chapter.

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Abstract (EN): This article explores the materiality of WhatsApp technology as a tool for unconventional identity construction and negotiation. Drawing from part of the data and findings of my PhD thesis, the article argues that WhatsApp communities conceptualised as digital counter-publics, are still linked to offline realities. This duality both allows for the negotiation and suppression of new identities. The fluidity of WhatsApp technology reshapes the concept of participation, which evolves into a discourse of identification. Those whose subject positions align with accepted norms gain greater freedom to participate, subsequently becoming decision-makers. This dynamic results in the suppression of alternative identities and the emergence of dominant political subjectivities, where the discourse shifts toward differentiating between "those who can participate" and "those who cannot," metaphorically substituting the signification of participation with identification.

Construção de identidade nos espaços do WhatsApp no Quénia

Resumo (PT): Este artigo explora a materialidade da tecnologia do WhatsApp como uma ferramenta para a construção e negociação não convencionais de identidades. A partir de parte dos dados e resultados da minha tese de doutoramento, o artigo argumenta que as comunidades do WhatsApp, concebidas como contra-públicos digitais, ainda estão vinculadas a realidades offline. Essa dualidade permite tanto a negociação quanto a supressão de novas identidades. A fluidez da tecnologia do WhatsApp reformula o conceito de participação, que evolui para um discurso de identificação. Aqueles cujas posições subjetivas se alinham com as normas aceites ganham maior liberdade para participar, tornando-se, posteriormente, agentes de decisão. Essa dinâmica resulta na supressão de identidades alternativas e no surgimento de subjetividades políticas dominantes, em que o discurso passa a diferenciar entre "aqueles que podem participar" e "aqueles que não podem", substituindo metaforicamente o significado de participação pelo de identificação.

Introduction

In recent years, considerable attention has been paid to the study of digital cultures and identity construction. The focus of these studies varies from self -representation (Choi et al., 2020) to how they are constructed by others (Pérez-Torres, 2024). However, identity construction in a highly networked environment where actors are connected in multiple ways (Castells, 2009) goes beyond human identity assertion to include how technology acts. Therefore one's presence in an online public space can only be a socio-technical construction, a result of how we define ourselves, are defined by others and how technology affords that process.

In digital counter-public spaces which run parallel to the public sphere due to exclusions in the latter, the process of identity construction is even more complex and fluid. For instance, there is the collective identity, which is the logic which brings the participants together to consider, the politics of participation, the expectation of how they ought to relate and how they actually relate to one another and the existential threat of the other. The two political WhatsApp groups, *Kabula Forward (KF)* and *East Asembo Development Forum* (*EADF*) that are referred in this paper as communities as they are imagined around the idea of place in Kenya and the logic of ordinary citizenship, are such spaces. These communities are what Florini (2019) describes as oscillating between enclaves and counter-publics given that WhatsApp is considerably private as compared to platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). Consequently participants (ordinary citizens) construct them as safe spaces for political participation away from dominant surveillance of the political elite, and acting as counter-publics, where they challenge dominant political discourses (Ooko, 2023).

Kenya, like many other countries in Africa, grapples with authoritarian tendencies (Shilaho, 2018). Media freedom is suppressed and with it voices of the marginalized ordinary citizen subjugated, dissent is stifled and sometimes through violent means (Freedom House, 2024). Ethnic identity, what is referred to as tribalism, is weaponised for political capital. Much as online spaces become alternative public spaces for political participation for ordinary citizens, the dominant political narratives still find their way in, affecting participants practices including identity construction.

Further materiality of WhatsApp technology in the sense of what it affords for identity construction such as profile formation, possibly allows for unconventional forms of identity construction and negotiation which moves away from traditional modes of identification.

The study is anchored on the tenets of Discourse Theory (DT) (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), particularly the ontology of the social, where the formation of discourse, including the material, is inherently political and an exercise power, open-ended and unfixed, with meanings and identities always in flux due to the contingent nature of social processes. This unfixity is driven by antagonisms—conflicting demands within the same social space—leading to partial and temporary fixations of meaning.

Thus this article explores how socio-technical practices of actors participating in the political WhatsApp communities affect the meaning of identity and identity construction leading to unconventional tropes of identification.

Unconventional identities are conceptualised in this study as the fluid, non-essentialist and unstable notions of the self and collective, only made stable through hegemonic practices. Unlike the conventional identities, they are not defined through nor occur within social and institutional expected norms, even though these norms constitute an existential threat to the new modes of identification.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Placing participation within the political

Participation is often defined through two lenses, those of the sociological and the political. The sociological approach encompasses a wide range of activities, including consumer behaviour and cultural engagement, where power plays a minor role. For example, participation can involve visiting museums or sharing media like radio (Carpentier, 2016). The sociological perspective centres interaction and involvement with society (Fudge Schormans, 2014). In contrast, the political perspective centers on power dynamics and aims to balance power among participants in decision-making processes (Carpentier, 2016). Carpentier (2016; 2017) further situates participation within democratic theory, highlighting its connection to power and its applicability beyond traditional politics to areas like media and communication, particularly in

community media and alternative media contexts. As such, participation is viewed as either minimalist which involve limited, competitive processes like elections, to maximalist models, which advocate for continuous, decentralized decision-making (Carpentier, 2012). Thus, participation itself becomes a contested concept within democratic discourse, acting as a floating and empty signifier.

The internet at its advent was deemed capable of addressing the problems of the exclusionary offline public sphere due to its perceived participatory nature which fosters open communication and participation (Dahlberg, 2005; Rheingold, 2000; Shapiro, 2000). However studies that followed the initial utopian wave whether dystopian (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Wilhelm, 2000) in which the democratic potential of the internet or its affordance for political engagement is questioned or even denied or syntopian which acknowledges both the democratic and undemocratic nature of the internet (Correa, 2010; Schradie, 2011; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011), show that digital spaces are not devoid of power hierarchies which directly affect the nature of political participation afforded on the platforms. In a study of online activism on Facebook and Twitter of a middle-class activist community in Southern Stockholm, Svensson (2012) found that, instead of the egalitarian discourse, members took two positions: the core, characterised by informed and active participants, and the periphery characterised by members who consumed information and analysis of issues from the core and rarely participated in the discussion.

Taking a critical lens to digital media forms, Fuchs (2014) reiterates the complex techno-social system of the internet embedded in economic, political and cultural media structures whereby users are both enabled to be productive but also exploited. This exploitation could be of an informational capitalism nature which, as Zukerfeld (2021) explains, could either happen through the expansion of digital technologies relying heavily on intellectual property, and the enclosure of knowledge or the rise of platforms that profit from openness, unpaid digital labor, and the commodification of attention. Further, in the era of big data where privacy lines have become blurred, online users' data is mined without consent and exploited for profit (Andrejevic, 2013) or political manipulation. In discourses of online practices of vulnerable groups such as teenagers, LGBTQI and women, bullying and harassment have been cited as a major deterrent to active participation owing to the psychological and emotional impact on the victims

(Choja & Nelson, 2016; Davis et al., 2015). Despite the nature of exploitation or discrimination, it is evident that power imbalances exist in the digital sphere hindering maximalist participation for the marginalized, consequently impacting identity construction.

Despite the power struggles in digital spaces, when it comes to use of digital spaces for political participation, Shirky (2011, p. 3) argues that social media not only afford freedom to access and share information, but also provide "long term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere." Similarly, Rasmussen (2014) argues that the internet and social media, like Twitter and Facebook, improves the conceptualization of the Habermas public sphere by doing away with the social chasm between speakers and listeners. The result is that there is a chance for everyone to participate meaningfully in public debates. Castells (2007), Papacharissi (2002) and Dahlberg (2001) also make a case for a digital sphere enabled by internet and social media for political information sharing and deliberation, even though such a public space is "an increasingly contested terrain, as it expresses the new historical stage in which a new form of society is being given birth […]" (Castells, 2007, p. 258). Dahlberg (2001) however still maintains the original conceptualization of the public sphere by positing the digital sphere as a place for rational debate. Arguably, the digital sphere conceptualization speaks to political participation as the ability of ordinary persons to have a voice and speak in public matters, a view supported by various social media scholars who argue that these platforms increase access to public issues, by reducing obstructions for public expressions more by ordinary citizens (Pasek et al., 2009; Towner & Dulio, 2012).

The counter-publics perspective associated with radical democracy, further builds on the debate of political participation. Fraser (1992) proposed to solve the shortcomings of the public sphere particularly its exclusivity by introducing the concept of the subaltern counter-publics. The counter-publics are smaller spheres of civic interaction which develop alongside the public sphere, where the previously marginalised groups like women, can get an opportunity to engage freely. Within this perspective, the digital media therefore provides an opportunity for participation for excluded groups (Dahlberg, 2005) as the "counter-publics locate public activity outside the public sphere" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 40). Arguably, the counter public spheres such as the WhatsApp communities studied, can be said to be somewhat egalitarian spaces which

move towards attaining maximalist participation. The counter-publics are not just spaces of deliberation but also spaces for invention of new discourses, counter-discourses and identity negotiation (Fraser, 1992) thus expanding opportunities shaping and initiating change in the political realm.

1.2.   Identification, power and technology

Classical social theories present offline identities, especially 'the self' as stable. This arises from the grounding of identity formation in enduring institutional frameworks (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1934), consistent socialization processes (Giddens, 1991) and the narratives of continuity individuals thrive to maintain throughout their life (Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959). This conceptualization has, however, been critiqued. Despite critiques of stability and essentialism from social constructionist and poststructuralist theories, which emphasize multiplicity and fluidity of identity (Bauman, 2001; 2013; Butler, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2014), some recent studies still maintain stability of identity despite globalization and digitization (Côté, 2015; Crocetti, 2017).

The move to fluidity and non-essentialism in offline identity formation, shapes the argument for unconventional modes of identification. Butler (1988), for instance, criticizes the predetermined gender binary system. She argues that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time-an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988, p. 19). By theorising gender as a performative act, she argues that identity is what we do as opposed to what we are and consequently envisions the possibility of the construction of other gender forms other than the stipulated gender binary categories. The idea of fluidity or contingency of identification in Butler's work is also seen in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who argue that identities are not pre-constituted but are rather constructed through the logic of antagonism (difference) which also prevents the full constitution of identities. Bauman (2013) also points out that identity becomes even more prominent when it is threatened or contested, bringing in power relations in the process of identity construction.

In other words, identity begins at a condition of "emptiness" to be filled discursively with whichever identification manages to be hegemonic. As such, the identification process is characterised by exclusion and power dynamics. It is this formulation of

identity that this study follows to understand how social affordances of technology and human action contribute to identity negotiation of the ordinary citizens in the WhatsApp communities.

It is by beginning from the point of "emptiness" together with the somewhat unprecedented control by which individuals can curate and project their desired selves in the digital sphere (Bartoli, 2022; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013), that online identities can be constructed in unconventional forms. Castells (1996, p. 3) argues that "in a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning." He therefore theorizes identity as source of meaning and experience. He acknowledges tensions in networks as a relation of power through which "societies are increasingly structured around the bipolar opposition of the Net and the Self" (Castells, 1996, p. 3). The tensions exist in various forms including surveillance capitalism which shape identification through algorithms and platform architectures (Zuboff, 2019).

Such tensions and fluidity act as catalysts for unconventional identity construction. For instance, through affordances of resistance to subjugations such as surveillance, individuals can be anonymous online or use pseudonyms to re-construct their offline identities (boyd, 2014, Zhao, 2006). Van Heijningen and van Clief (2017) found that anonymity allows women in Kenya to open up about their sexuality on the internet, something most would otherwise not engage in offline. However, with further technological developments, some scholars have argued for the need to nuance thinking about anonymity in online spaces, consequently bridging the gap between embodiment and disembodiment. Zhao et. al (2008) gives an example of how users on Facebook reveal their identities through profile pictures rather than "telling them" rendering such sites "nonymous".

Sardá, et al (2019) argument that anonymity exists in different degrees depending on the range of tools used and functions of different internet browsers, further demonstrates sociotechnical agency in how identity is constructed and privacy is performed online. Accordingly, different technologies may afford different levels of protection of one's privacy. WhatsApp (2018) for instance uses an end-to –end encryption technology to automatically ensure privacy and protect users from surveillance while Facebook

largely depends on how users appropriate the technology. As such, the degree of privacy is dependent both on how much one is willing to disclose and the privacy settings of the technology which stills functions through the user's agency.

Khazraee and Novak (2018) identify two affordances for discourse and performance as key to collective identity construction in digital protest. They argue that affordances which exist in form of visual and textual practices enabled by Facebook firstly affords discourse by helping actors to collectively frame grievances and negotiate meaning, in this case, constructing the mandatory hijab for women as oppressive. Secondly, by enabling women to deliberately share photo biographies of themselves not wearing the hijab, Facebook contribute to their performance of protest as these acts mobilize wider audiences to join the movement (Khazraee & Novak, 2018). In a netnographic study to determine what motivates Nigerian diaspora in the US to use the WhatsApp platform for community and identity construction, Udenze and Ugoala (2019), found that WhatsApp is a major source of information about home for these users. The sharing of information and interaction in the platform among users in return help to create national identities and strong bonds of companionship.

Further hybridity owing to the networked nature of online spaces (boyd, 2010) means lines between the private and public spheres are blurred and context collapsed (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Consequently, individuals in online spaces have to navigate various social realities and multiple identity expectations, interpellation, as Althusser put it. All these tensions are in competition to stabilize identity, thus unconventional identities are eventually defined even though temporarily until another element in competition becomes hegemonic.

2. Methods

2.1 Cases

Two multiple instrumental WhatsApp communities, *East Asembo Development Forum (EADF)* and *Kabula Forward (KF)* which focus on political engagement, specifically holding leaders accountable and promoting development, were purposely selected for their suitability to provide insights on identity construction in online spaces. These groups are typical of other social media groups engaging in political discourse and in which power struggles abound as they are formed by ordinary citizens against the

"other", the political elite. WhatsApp groups are, however, more private than groups on other social media platforms like Facebook. *EADF* and *KF* represent the wards of *East Asembo* and *Kabula* in Western Kenya, predominantly inhabited by the *Luo* and *Bukusu* people, respectively. Both groups include members from rural, urban, and diaspora areas. At the time of data collection, *KF* had 230 members, and *EADF* had 182, with numbers fluctuating due to changes in group membership. Most members in *EADF* were between the ages of 18–35 years, while *KF's* members were mostly over 35. Female participation was lower in both groups. Data was collected through observations, focus groups discussions and interviews.

2.2 Techno-trope analysis.

The concept of "techno-trope" combines "technology" and "rhetorical tropes" to analyze how technological features in platforms like WhatsApp carry figurative meanings that influence inclusion and exclusion within communities. This analysis is rooted in Discourse Theory (DT), which views all discourse as inherently political. Rhetorical tropes such as metaphors, are not just linguistic devices but also political tools that shape social practices (Howarth & Griggs, 2006) including mediated ones. The analysis highlights how sociotechnical actors use metaphors to create new meanings and power dynamics. The analysis also examined how metaphors contribute to hegemony in meaning making in the WhatsApp communities, including shaping identity construction.

Wittgenstein (2006) argues that a sign gains its signification only through conventional language-games in which it is used. That is, it must follow the rules that users have learnt over time, such that it becomes their linguistic behaviour. In other words, it is not what is said but the context, the "how" in which it said. However, a metaphor if analysed discursively, "begins in one language-game and ends in another (or at another level of the same language-game)" (as cited in de França Gurgel, 2016, p. 160). This statement provides an entry point of considering metaphors ontologically. For example, the term mobile phone refers to the portable communication device that replaced the static telephone. In *M-pesa* (a mobile phone banking service in Kenya) however, the mobility metaphor is moved from telecommunications to the realm of banking and

would require an understanding of how banking works and issues of access to banking services in Kenya to be comprehended.

The *M-pesa* example demonstrates that technology, including communication one, already the use of metaphors in their design. Hurtienne and Blessing (2007) trace the use of 'metaphor' in user interface design to early eighties with the advent of Graphical User Interfaces (GUI). They give the example of how the office metaphor was employed through incorporating graphics of familiar objects like trash can, folders, calculators on computers (Hurtienne & Blessing, 2007) This aided user interaction with computers as these are objects office workers have previously experienced and therefore could easily guess their use on the computer. This utilization of metaphor in interface design means that a metaphor is not just a figure of speech but also a cognitive mechanism, what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) term as a conceptual metaphor whose operation is "mostly unconscious, automatic, and is used with no noticeable effort, just like our linguistic system and the rest of our conceptual system (Lakoff, 1993, p. 245). As such, a tropological analysis of WhatsApp technology at both ontic and ontological level is therefore possible as is with the case of the human actor as part of the WhatsApp community assemblage.

3 Findings

3.1 "I can be whoever I want to be!"

Consider the "profile" metaphor of identity on WhatsApp. It affords the freedom to be whoever one wants to be online by allowing one to "customize" their profile. The "profile" acts as an empty signifier which can be filled with an avatar, a video or photograph. The default status on one's profile which usually reads, "Hey there, I am Using WhatsApp" can also be changed into a personalized message giving freedom to identify in whatever way one chooses, including through unconventional modes as confirmed by several participants during interviews and observations who use pseudonyms, cartoons for profile pictures to maintain anonymity. They cited the need for anonymity so they could participate without fear of surveillance by the government.

The empty WhatsApp profile icon, metaphoric for fluid identification coheres with Laclau's (2006) argument that political subjectivity only occurs from a discursive construction. As such participants can identify with pseudonyms instead of using real

identity markers. It is also possible not to fill in the profile and remain anonymous. In such a case, an individual appears in a WhatsApp community as just a phone number without even a picture. Scholarship in line with the disembodied discourse of online spaces are also in support of anonymity as the opposite of identity. The argument is that the absence of conventional identity markers such as names and real pictures, which are often used as tropes of exclusion and inclusion- names may in the context of Kenya depict one's tribe or gender, faces may depict race-fosters better participation in politics (Beyer, 2014; Gekker, 2012). Anonymity and pseudonymity are also hailed as enabling the escape of surveillance from the state, another important factor for political participation.

However, there are those who chose to use their real names terming anonymity as a cowardly act even though they maintain fluidity in terms of their profile picture, as shown in the excerpt below:

> I am very well known to many people here in *Kabula* because I was born here, schooled here and I work just here in Bungoma town, so I have settled in my village. I know in WhatsApp you can create whatever profile you want or even use nicknames, but in my case it is useless. I do not see the need to use pseudonyms on WhatsApp or even remain anonymous like others do, that is for cowards or people who are hiding something. After all, we are residents of *Kabula* and are on *KF* to participate together for the good of *Kabula*, so why hide? How will our leaders know we mean business if we do not face them directly? As for a profile picture, you can upload anything. My profile picture is my house (Waswa, interview, *KF*, 2018).

Waswa views anonymity and pseudonymity as cowardly acts against the collective identity of ordinary citizen and the course of the WhatsApp community. His views cohere with studies which associate anonymity with deception (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006), bullying (Sticca & Perren, 2013), and fake news (Wang et al., 2018) which could be potentially fatal as was the case of WhatsApp groups in India. There was a wave of mob violence in India in 2018 of hate killings on account of disinformation spread through WhatsApp texts and videos, with some people being lynched under the guise that they were child kidnappers (Arun, 2019). It must be emphasised though that deep seated fissures within the Indian society coupled with governance failures found expression through technology as Vasudeva and Barkdull (2020) argue. Hence WhatsApp in and of itself was not responsible for the mob violence, vigilantism, and collapse of the rule of law.

These competing narratives to be or not to be anonymous, form the first instance of antagonisms responsible for entangling identity with participation. They are a testament

to how fluid surveillance has become in the digital era, where the gaze has become multi-directional and the watched may, after all, welcome the watching (Bauman & Lyon, 2012) thereby taking back their agency. Studies which demonstrate how women reconceptualize "to be looked-at-ness" as an act of agency rather than passive objectification through their online practices such as sharing selfies (Senft & Baym, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2016) also explain how technology can afford previously objectified or marginalized groups the power to express themselves in new unconventional and non-subjugated ways. However, the internet simultaneously re-inscribes self-objectification and traditional "to-be-looked-at-ness" by embedding women's visibility within neoliberal logics of surveillance, commodification, and the male gaze (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Dobson, 2015). Moreover, the duality of the WhatsApp infrastructure, that is, the interplay of affordance/constraint which questions the narrative of anonymity and pseudonymity also seems to be in line with Asenbaum's (2018) argument of an emergent digital persona which fuses elements of both anonymity and identity, in contrast to the binary narrative of the same.

While the empty WhatsApp "profile" signifies one can be anonymous thus affording robust interactivity and navigability, it could be viewed as a false affordance, especially since one can only do this after going through other sequences of signing up with WhatsApp, with the most notable action being adding your mobile phone number into the app without which you cannot sign up. This type of constraint is what Norman (2013) calls interlocks, "safety" constrains which prevents users from using a technology "inappropriately" by determining the sequence of use. Consequently, the metaphoric "profile" renders the signifier of freedom of identification empty. This is because it can take up any meaning including control, which is what happens by being forced to sign up to WhatsApp through their phone number without which one cannot access WhatsApp and benefit from the interactivity it affords by connecting people to others; all which are precursors to participation.

Findings from observations of the *EADF* and *KF* communities further show that even if some members may be using pseudonyms, during interactions, the others constantly ask the anonymous to identify themselves, given the nature of the communities and their purpose. Moreover, in the context of social media, where anonymous communication is quickly becoming outdated, the dynamic shifts. Facebook, in particular, has been

successful in linking online profiles to real-world identities (boyd, 2012) further deconstructing the self-identification affordance of WhatsApp.

3.2 Deconstructing primordialism in identity construction.

Findings in this study show that though at the inception of the *Kabula* and *EADF* WhatsApp communities and earlier interactions among members, political identities of members were largely determined conventionally by primordialism, they with time evolved to socially constructed political subjectivities like the collective, "ordinary citizen". Some studies argue that tropes of exclusion and inclusion related to identity and politics in Kenya are mostly defined by primordial factors (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002; Shilaho, 2018). According to Shilaho (2018), essentialist social identity components like ethnicity and tribalism and even clannism in some instance, are the factors around which politics and political identities are constructed in Kenya.

Despite being in a rural area, *Kabula* ward, is situated close to Bungoma, a town, and also the headquarters of Bungoma county. As such, its composition is somewhat cosmopolitan. *Bukusu* is, however, the predominant ethnic group in Bungoma County. On the other hand, *East Asembo* Ward is in a rural area far from a town centre and generally inhabited by just one ethnic group, the *Luos*. The two cases highlighted below show how clannism and ethnicity played a role in determining identity and belonging in the two WhatsApp communities:

Case one:

There was an intense argument in *EADF* regarding where in *East Asembo* a proposed Teachers Training College (TTC) had to be constructed. Each clan within *East Asembo* insisted that it be built within their clan. As such, everyone was putting their case forward why their clan (the land occupied by their clan) would be the ideal host for the upcoming project, highlighting positive self-identification and negative attributes for others. A member, while responding to another, insisted that the TTC should be hosted in *K'Onyango*[1] (one of the clans in *East Asembo*) and held that "*Ja'Kamalumbe*" (which loosely translates to son of *Kamalumbe*, the member he was responding to), like others of the *Kamalumbe* clan, was self-centered and always wanted to push for all projects to be implemented in his area. At this point, another member interjected, telling

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[1]K' or Ka denotes place and therefore K'Onyango translates directly as Onyango's place. Onyango is a male name. this further shows that identity is patrilineal.

Ja'Konyango that the one he is referring to as *Ja'Kamalumbe*[2] is a true son of *East Asembo* while he was a "*jadak*[3]" He told him where he originated from upon which the third member responded, "You are *Ja' Alego Kogelo* and you know it. Your great grandfather was a *Ja' Kogelo* who migrated from his ancestral land to settle in *East Asembo*. You should just shut up because you have no stake in this. This is *an East Asembo* matter!" The member, who had identified himself as a *Ja'Konyango*, was so distraught that he exited the online community (Observations, *EADF*, 2018).

Case two:

In a bid to discourage members of *KF* to vote for a certain aspirant for the parliamentary seat of Bumula constituency where *Kabula* ward is situated, a participant, Patrick (observations, *KF*, 2018) listed reasons he claimed even *Bukusu* elders would not allow the said candidate to be elected. The major reasons included that the said candidate was posing as a resident of *Kabula* when he was an immigrant from *Tongaren*, another constituency in Bungoma County. Patrick also claimed they (the *Bukusu*) gave the candidate land and a wife, but he mistreated, divorced her, and remarried a Ugandan. Evidence that the candidate had no respect for *Bumula.*

In case one, members highlight the patrilineal nature of identity and belonging which supports the essentialist notion of ethnic, racial or biological identity as stable entities (Oostendorp & Jones, 2015). In this structure, women belong either by birth or marriage. Moreover, the right to participate in the discussion of construction of the TTC, was directly predicated on primordial sense of belonging and identity, that is clanism. Additionally, members predominantly communicate in *Dholuo*, a language spoken by *Luos*, which could be viewed as the trope of excluding anybody else who does not speak the language. But this factor is not significant in the *EADF* case as all its membership is *Luo*. English or a mix of English and *Dholuo* is also used. In *Kabula Forward* on the other hand, belonging from the word go hangs precariously on the tribe and "birthplace" or autochthony components. Comments signalling claims on identity and belonging based on the two components such as "I was born here, so you cannot claim I do not know anything about *Kabula*" (Weta, observations, *KF*, 2018) or someone being praised as "a true *Bukusu*" (Tetu, observations, *KF*, 2017) for their

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[2]Ja' is gender specific referent whose signification is 'son of.' Ja'Kamalumbe is therefore son of the place, Kamalumbe. The female version would be Nya'Kamalumbe.
[3] Immigrant.

approved actions are few nor do members dwell so much on them when they arise. Interestingly, however, this online community has membership from outside the predominant tribe, *Bukusu*, who since they can speak the dominant language, have been embraced by other members. This is a testament of the social constructionist view of identification through acculturation (Adams & van de Vijver, 2017; Ward, 2008).

Case two represents one of the rare occasions in which the issue of belonging by virtue of tribe came up in relation to decision making on leadership by *KF* members. The allusion is that the said political candidate is not *Bukusu* nor does he come from Bumula, the constituency in which he has declared his candidature and therefore should be excluded at the vote. The tribal identity marker used by Patrick (observations, *KF*, 2018) represents part of the existential logics of difference which constantly threatens the collective and individual political subjectivity of ordinary citizens and consequently the right to participate in these communities. This is akin to the exclusion of immigrants (in the international context) from political participation, through the invocation of one of the traditional tropes of exclusion; that of citizenship. In this arrangement, citizenship becomes the measure of immigrant integration into political life. The ethnic dimension is therefore a factor in political participation in social media.

Even though the politicised tribal identity marker is a real threat to the collective political subjectivity of ordinary citizens, findings also show that these WhatsApp communities constantly strive to overcome the threat and rearticulate the collective political subjectivity as is seen in another study on how the use of nationalism artefacts and deixics in everyday talk in a WhatsApp group in Kenya, points to a collective imagined nationhood among members despite differences (Katiambo & Ooko, 2022). The following excerpt exemplifies this point:

> Basically, belonging to *Kabula Forward* is determined by being born in *Kabula* or hailing from *Kabula*. Because we have those born in towns, but they belong to *Kabula* because their fathers are sons of *Kabula*. However, we have those who do not hail from *Kabula* but they live and work among us. They also belong to this community because they are our friends, neighbours, what affects us also affects them, so they can contribute their views freely. I am an example of this (Zari, interview, *KF*, 2018).

Zari's sentiments not only deconstruct the notion of essentialism in identity construction but also begin to tease out other possibilities, including unprecedented ones, of substituting identification with participation in these WhatsApp communities in the bid to preserve the logic of equivalence which stabilizes the collective political subjectivity even though temporarily.

3.3 Participation as the right to "voice views" and be heard?

From the excerpts above by Zari (interview, *KF*, 2018) and Teacher (FGD, *EADF*, 2018) who stated that though he was not originally born in East Asembo, he belongs because he constantly contributes his views on matters affecting East Asembo, the signification of belonging as participation comes forth strongly dislocating the primordial modes of identification. Though the participants articulate the "speaking" and being "heard" differently, the implication of these articulations is the same. Zari (FGD, *KF*, 2018) speaks of "contributing views." The Teacher (FGD, *EADF*, 2018), in contrast, directly equates participation to "voicing his opinion" and "being heard." Therefore, one can argue that to belong to these WhatsApp communities is equivalent to "voicing," "speaking" and being "heard (understood)", which in turn are equivalent to participation, making participation an identity construct.

There is a groundswell of studies which analyse voice as a valuable tool through which ordinary citizens, especially marginalised groups, can engage in public affairs (Shumow, 2015; Verba et al., 1995). In contrast there are scholars like Carpentier (2012) and Crawford (2009) who are sceptical of the simplistic use of voice in the analysis of participation. Crawford (2009, p. 526) for instance, critiques the fact that internet studies has focused more on the aspect of voice and posting in public forums with the neglect of semi-private spaces like "behind-the-scenes direct messaging in social media environments" in which WhatsApp fits. Despite criticisms, I argue that voice is still an important analytical tool in participation, especially if considered metaphorically, in teasing out the mostly subtle power structures which make up the cyberspace (Mitra & Watts, 2002). Moreover, other scholars have placed voice right in the analysis of participation by reconceptualising it as a "right to be understood" and not merely the "right to speak" (Couldry, 2010). Couldry (2010) critiques neoliberalism which favours voices of power as opposed to that of ordinary citizens. He insists that voice matters, not just having it, but the voice should be of value. Consequently, it is not enough for social media technology like WhatsApp to afford plurality and amplify voices of ordinary citizens, those voices must matter. For instance, to enroll on WhatsApp and to be an active participating member of a WhatsApp community, one needs to have internet connectivity which costs money. Given digital inequalities in Africa this leads to denial of one's voice and consequently presence on digital spaces.

Authenticity of voice on the other hand is how trustworthy and valid the voice is towards pushing the perceived agenda of the community, that is, to hold political leaders accountable and push for development. From observations of discussions in both communities, there are participants who get castigated often for being mouthpieces of their "sponsors" (referring to politicians) who give them handouts including data. In fact, most of the members dismiss these members beholden to politicians and anything they say or promise since they are seen as an extension of the politicians. It is, therefore, not easy to tell when they are themselves and when they are echoing the politician, the "defined enemy" as the conversation below exemplifies:

> **Don**: Since the current MCA and MP took over, we are *seeing* development in our ward and constituency. One project after another! We are really doing well.
>
> **Ben**: Are you serious? What projects are you talking about? Unless those projects are being implemented at your homestead!
>
> **Don**: I knew you had to say something negative about my comment, I know you are still in mourning. The candidate you supported failed. It is time for you to shut up and watch how development is done.
>
> **Ben**: Who does not know you are on the payroll of your beloved leaders. The internet bundles they buy you are the ones you use to shout their praises here daily. Without them you cannot even afford to be online. No wonder you do not want anyone to criticize them. I understand you perfectly, you have to earn your keep (observations, *EADF*, 2018).

While this exchange points to the socio-economic realities which contribute to digital inequality, most importantly it points to a mediated governmentality, where political leaders still exercise their power even in a space like WhatsApp. Don (Observations, *EADF*, 2018) is part of ordinary citizens' collective, but his voice betrays a corruption of authenticity. What the corruption of voices means is that the logic of difference, occasioned by the source of one's internet data, is dislocating elements within the equivalential chain of ordinary citizens, while strengthening the constitutive outside (political leaders). This further fragment the "ordinary citizen" identity and the rights/agency they should otherwise enjoy given this subject positionality. Additionally, the instability of the collective identity opens up opportunities for the emergence of other forms of identification.

From the last two sections discussed, we can already begin to see the role of materiality be it cultural or economic in constructing identities which in turn informs the signification of participation.

3.4 So near, yet so far: The "Diasporan," the "Nairobian," the "Local" and participation.

From observations, findings show that even though WhatsApp represents a digital space, physical places still define participation. However, the definition is not in the sense of one's ability to participate physically in an event or conversation but their performativity in relation to what the places they are physically located metaphorically represent. The mobility affordance of WhatsApp means that even those who are not physically in the local places, either *Kabula* or *East Asembo* can still connect with their locally based counterparts. The figure of the diasporan is particularly focal when it comes to participation, given how participation is constructed in these WhatsApp communities. However, it is not a clear-cut figure as the term diaspora seems to have a conflictual meaning in these WhatsApp communities as even those within the nation-state but have migrated from the local antagonistically lay claim to this identity:

> Though I reside in Nairobi, and come home mostly during December Holidays, I consider myself as part of the Diaspora members. Those outside the country are not at home, just like I am not at home. Just like them, I connect with people at home on WhatsApp so they cannot expect me to be physically present at all activities (Sheba, FGD, *EADF*, 2018).

But identity is not only self-referential but relational. For instance, in formulating the identity of community media, Carpentier (2015) argues that much as it is a fluid concept, the identity of community media can be fixed by a negative relativity, explaining what it is not. Upon probing the locally based members of the WhatsApp communities, the antagonism between them and "Nairobians" was evident during the interviews and FGDs, some of the locally based respondents noted:

> Nairobi is not diaspora, where have these people gone? They are just here, yet they do not participate. They do not attend fundraisers, they do not come to funerals, they do not want to be part of us, when they do not live far from home (Doe, FGD, *KF*, 2018).

> People of Nairobi think they know so much, but they know nothing. They are just hustlers. We are the people on the ground, we talk, they listen! (Angela, FGD, *EADF*, 2018).

The excerpts point out the power inequalities among the different subject positions in the equivalential chain of ordinary citizens, in favour of the "diasporan" as opposed to the urbanite, and the local as opposed to the urbanite. A logic of difference informed by broader nation-level discourses are arguably responsible for this antagonism, further fragmenting the collective identity of ordinary citizens. Before the liberation of airwaves in Kenya, mainstream media was based mostly in the capital city, Nairobi, and

a few other towns, thus cutting off rural areas from media access. This meant that those in the rural areas depended on their kin in urban areas including Nairobi, to give them information or especially on state operations or confirm information they had heard either over the radio or from hearsay. Political information therefore flowed vertically to the disadvantage of the rural inhabitants.

However, with decentralization, what Kenyans popularly call "devolution," power has somewhat shifted to the periphery, namely counties, the second-tier government, making them the focus of most citizens in the hope that they will deliver what successive national governments have failed to do (Ooko, 2023). Some Nairobians now must look downwards (and backwards) to the counties they left behind, which majorly comprise rural areas, for information and for economic opportunities which the centre no longer monopolises. WhatsApp technology has also contributed to this dislocation. It has brought Nairobians and rural residents in close discourse, made visible their daily struggles, as a result, the mystic effect surrounding Nairobians is now being demystified as a respondent illuminate:

> [….]in fact, Nairobi people should just come back home. We have realized they do not even live better lives than us. They constantly haggle with us for the 'small' county jobs posted in *EADF* (Pat, FGD, *EADF*, 2018).

Pat's comments like the others above, reference to home and the physical distance between home and Nairobi, suggest another form of dislocation, a return to boundary in what should otherwise be boundaryless online spaces. This shows the back-and-forth relationship between offline and online spaces, supported for instance, by literature that online spaces are spaces of mobilization while real participation action occurs offline as seen in the case of contemporary revolutions like the Arab spring, occupy movement and so on (Steinert-Threlkeld et al., 2015; Akpojivi, 2018). On the other hand, Appadurai's (1996) concept of translocality means one can argue that invoking home is not necessarily a return to boundary but going back to the point of where an analysis should begin. And it is this starting from the local before moving to the global that fixes the signification of participation, its metaphoric substitution with material in these communities:

> We understand diaspora people, they are not home physically but they participate actively, they send us a lot of money when we have harambees[4]. Their parents represent them at functions. They are always with us" (Tito, FGD, *KF*, 2018).

> We do not see you when you are just nearby, you do not attend important happenings in the village like funerals; you do not participate. You do not contribute to fundraisers; you do not participate, and we do not think you belong. In fact, as an admin, I removed a very senior person, a brigadier in the army. He may be of our tribe and a "Kabulan," but members asked that I remove him. They do not want him. All these years he has held a prominent position in the army, but he has never given any son or daughter of *Kabula* a job! (Admin 2, interview, *KF*, 2018).

What is interesting about these excerpts is the absence/presence dialectic which renders the diaspora present even in their absence and Nairobians absent even in their presence. That the "presence" of the diaspora is celebrated in these WhatsApp communities in relation to their "capacity to give" is not new as seen in numerous studies of diaspora and their connection to home (see Nyamnjoh, 2017; Rowe, 2018). What is interesting in this finding is how this celebration of "giving" is a testament of sedimented discourses in the Kenyan society, perpetuated by politicians who use harambees (fundraisers) as a façade of being development conscious. Of interest also is how "giving" facilitates the metaphoric substitution of participation with the material and its effect on identification. This substitution of "giving" with participation and its consequence on determination of identity constructs in the WhatsApp communities is similar to how Somali refugees in Nairobi "constructed a global diasporic identity tied to free flows of capital […] by using money as a substitute for identity documents" (Balakian, 2016, p. 87). Participation has therefore been objectified in an assembly of certain material objects defined in relation to a constitutive outside who in this case is not the political leader but the "non-giver" element. The alliance of the collective identity of ordinary citizen is consequently weakened creating the unconventional identity constructs of "giver" (those who participate) and "non-giver" (those who do not participate).

Conclusion

Power struggles abound in any social set-up and these online WhatsApp communities are no exception. Power dynamics consequently affect the sociotechnical practices of actants in these communities including the logic of identification. While the WhatsApp

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[4]Harambee means pulling together. A term popularised by the first president of Kenya who called for Kenyans just after independence to pull together resources to build the nation. Subsequently it has been used to mean a fundraiser.

technology affords fluidity in identification given its metaphoric "empty" identity conventions which allows use avatars and pseudonyms, for instance, these same elements of freedom can also be elements of control leading to stability in identity albeit temporarily. As such, while sociotechnical practices of actors in these WhatsApp community assemblages enable individuals to identify both conventionally and non-conventionally like through primordial tropes or anonymity, eventually hegemonic neoliberal sentiments of capitalism, poor governance and structured social institutions of culture in which funeral attendance is, for instance, highly valued, metaphorically subtituted the signification of participation to material and rendered it an identity construct. To participate therefore is to give in kind, your time, your money. It is not so much where one is, after all the mobility affordance has already rendered place redundant to a great extent. Your presence is important but that could be substituted with your money. Nor do labels one self-identifies with matter. What counts is that you give and eventually the identities which prevail are: those who participate or those who do not participate as defined by one's "giving behaviour."

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