

Religious Bumper Stickers in Contemporary Botswana: Social and Cultural Constructs and Denominational Positioning in the Battle for Membership

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Abstract

This paper analyses the aesthetic elements constructed in religious communications. Employing semiotic analysis, the paper focuses on the bumper stickers pasted and found on cars in Botswana. The study sought to examine the techniques of persuasion used by various local Christian religious ministries and the approach that these ministries have towards the public they are attempting to reach out. The data used is part of an ethnographic study that was conducted from April 2016 to March 2019, whose overarching aim was to explore the intersection between media and religion in Botswana, particularly the extent to which religious groups use new media to advance their religious missions. The findings demonstrate that through the use of bumper stickers, various religious denominations in Botswana have attempted to elicit people's interests in their churches, and advanced the positioning of their church in society.

Introduction

Although Botswana embraces freedom of worship, it has largely been considered a Christian nation. There is an implied notion that all the people in the country are Christians. Despite this, data from the 2011 Population and Housing Census determined that Christianity (at 79%) remains the predominant religion, followed by African Traditional Religion (4.1%), Islam (0.74%) and with at least 15% of the population not associated with any religion. Haron and Jensen (2008) have classified Christianity in Botswana into three categories of mainline churches: Africa Independent churches; and Evangelical, Pentecostal or Charismatic churches. With regard to studies on religion in Botswana, what has been of huge interest, perhaps also informing the need for more studies has been the dramatic increase in the number of denominations (churches) with the latest entrant being the prophetic ministries with Prophets/Prophetesses and sometimes Apostles doubling up as key founders and owners of the churches. As of May 2019, there were over 2500 registered churches/religious ministries or denominations in a population of approximately 2,4 million people. Interestingly for these denominations, there is a growing need to amass as many followers and build a large body of membership which has not only become the basis for its potency as a religious ministry/church in society, but also a determinant of the power of its religious leader (Lesitaokana, 2018). It is conceivably the aspect of the large number of followers that each ministry seeks to attain above all. In their endeavours to realise this goal, many local denominations have attempted to use both the conventional

and new media to advertise their brands, inform society about their places of operations, and special services/gatherings through which to extend their services to the public. In so doing, the members paste stickers with religious messages on their vehicles with the intention that those following will see them and get the messages.

Previous studies have considered the effectiveness of the media to advance religious communications. Thomas (2008), in his book *Strong religion, zealous media: Christian fundamentalism and communication in India* suggests that religious actors use media to further their political agendas, and that such practices have varied from one context to the other. It has also been established that Christianity has become popular in Ghana as a result of media use by religious actors (Asamoah-Gyadu and Kwabena, 2005). In other studies, there is evidence of growing practices by religious denominations to use digital and social media to reach as many of its followers through online and mobile means of communication (Hoover and Stewart M, 2012; Lomborg and Charles, 2012; Mathambo, 2018). To a large extent, the use of media to facilitate social interaction has facilitated media cultures associated with social and cultural bonds (Boyd, 2014; Rotman et al., 2011). Also evident is the complex nature of digital connectivity and communication into which online users are immersed. Interestingly also, through virtual online spaces media audiences are directly targeted with a vast amount of information, while also expected to engage and interact (Lesitaokana, 2018). Perhaps the increasing nexus between religion and media is one best asserted by Hjarvard (2011, p.111) when he noted that, “The media have become an important, if not primary, source of information about religious issues, and religious information and experiences become moulded according to the demands of popular media genres”. It is therefore the messages, presentation styles and modes of delivery that present an array of avenues for inquiry.

Lundby (2013) suggests that through media studies, “religious studies should be able to analyze religious expressions in various media using the interpretative (hermeneutic) and critical-historic approaches that dominate their written, text-oriented disciplines”, and that through religious studies we “will benefit from an understanding of the production processes for media content, produced “texts” as also visual or multimodal documents and wider reception processes, as well as the role of such mediated communication in society” (p. 225). An example is the use of bumper stickers, a trend that has also become routinely observed on cars in urban Botswana. Case (1992, p. 107) suggests that through bumper stickers, a lot of ideas, values, groups, witticisms and expressions of selfhood contend for public notice. For Bloch (2000), bumper stickers are a ubiquitous and openly accessible medium of communication, which constitutes Habermas’s notion of public sphere. A bumper sticker can consist of aesthetic elements such as images, color, text and phrases that are presented to convey meanings to the viewers. This paper examines the visual elements that are employed on the stickers by various religious groups in their quest to reach out and persuade the public. In particular, the study seeks to examine the social and cultural signs, the centrality of the message, and the semiotic discourses evidenced by the

bumper stickers. The paper is presented in five parts. Part one consists of a brief overview of the concept of semiotics, as well as the literature on the use of bumper stickers. This is aimed at demonstrating the relevance of semiotic analysis in interpreting visual expressions in media studies. This is followed by a description of the methodology employed in the study. The third part offers the findings of a qualitative research on the use of bumper stickers in an urban setting. Part four discusses the findings on the meanings of the aesthetic elements deciphered from semiotic analyses. The final part of the paper consists of conclusions and recommendations for future research.

The Use of Bumper Stickers: Brief Overview of the Literature

Of recent, several scholars have studied and analyzed the effectiveness of bumper stickers for communication in public discourse. For instance, in a study in Egypt to understand the meanings portrayed in the posters of Abdelfattah Al-Sisi's 2014 Egyptian campaign, it was discovered that the crafters of the posters and video campaigns used semiotic elements which resonated with many of Al-Sisi's supporters, particularly the aspects of security and safety (El-Nawawy and Elmasry, 2016). Teo (2004) also studied the verbal and visual messages encoded within three Singapore's national campaign posters: the 1983 Productivity, the 1996 Speak Mandarin, and the 1995 Courtesy Campaign posters. In that study which aimed to uncover possible ideological interests, meanings and implications imbricated within the semiotic of the posters, Teo (2004) concluded that,

[i]ndeed, the fragility of texts as a unitary meaning-making system and that communication of meaning is, in fact, a dynamic and fluid process transcending the linguistic or verbal sign, bringing together the agency, process and effect of meaning on the reader. (p. 210)

For Teo (2004), the visual elements in the photograph, including the facial expressions of the figures and their meanings represented the social and cultural contexts of the nation. Perhaps, the practice, idea and influence of pasting stickers on the car is best described by both Bloch (2000) and Fiske (1999) "cars are a status symbol the world over" (p. 440), and "A car is not just transport, but a speech act" (p. 34) respectively. Hence, it is not a coincidence that messages are placed on cars through the use of bumper stickers. According to Bloch (2000), a bumper sticker is a form of rhetoric that constitutes an obvious need for participation by members of the public. Similarly, Chilwa's (2008) study in Lagos, Nigeria established that through stickers, people defined their identities with religious organisations, thus guaranteeing users some sense of social security and privileges. The study also revealed that religious bumper stickers evidenced pugnacious efforts to propagate religious following between Islam and Christianity.

Studies conducted in various parts of the world, such as Nigeria, Israel, USA, Singapore and Egypt confirm the growing use of bumper stickers, and the evolving discourses for the same in reference to the geographic, social and cultural contexts through which they are used. With the aim to add to this

literature, this study seeks answers to the following research questions: What are the uses to which religious bumper stickers are put in Botswana? What are some of the semiotic meanings evident in religious bumper stickers in Botswana? In this paper, an analysis of religious bumper stickers will be conducted to give a better understanding of the elements that effectively draw the attention of motorists and other members of the public for whom the stickers are intended.

Semiotic Analysis

Semiotics is the study of signs and their meaning in society. Signs are understood as anything that can convey meaning, such as words, photographs, street signs, designs, including some of the objects adopted by humans. Within linguistic structures signs and symbols are considered as significant part of communication. One of the founders of semiology (the study of semiotics), Ferdinand de Saussure proposed the arbitrary combination of a *signifier* and the *signified* as components of the sign. The *signifier* is the item, sound, image or code and the *signified* is the concept or meaning of that sign. The meanings of the signs and symbols are within the signs and symbols themselves and expectations are that these are waiting to be decoded by the reader (Hall, 1993). According to Anstey and Bull (2009), multimodal texts can be delivered through various media and technologies. Bull and Anstey (2010) also suggest five semiotic systems that could be considered when exploring and examining multimodal texts. These include linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial. In their view, “linguistics comprises vocabulary, generic structure, written language and grammar”, and visual include “aspects of color, vectors and viewpoint in still and moving images”, whereas audio “comprises aspects such as volume, pitch, rhythm of music and sound effects”. The system of gestural consists of “movement, speed and stillness in facial expression and body language”, whereas spatial “comprises of aspects such as proximity, direction, position of layout and organisation of objects in space”.

Semiotic textual analysis involves the assessment of how realistic a text represents the world through codes. For instance, Matthews (1990, p. 231) contends that visually effective and informative posters must be designed with regard to audience conceptualisation. Therefore, to understand the meanings of the signs, we look closely at the small samples of text such as media and channels (Fiske and Hartley, 1978). It has been suggested that in order for linguists to understand the complex relationship that binds words and images together, there should be a multilevel description of their logical-semantic relationships between the two (Kong, 2006). With regard to bumper stickers, considerations should be on what the sticker is intended to serve, its design style, color and presentations, messages crafted in words, images displayed in the sticker and its strategic placement for the audience to clearly see. Therefore, in order to understand the communication and messages in religious bumper stickers, it is necessary first to decode the meanings within the visual elements of color, images, phrases, vectors and viewpoints. Conceivably, such interpretations are regularly aligned

to the intended significations that were proposed for the audience during the crafting or design of the bumper stickers.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected in Gaborone as part of an ethnographic study that was conducted from April 2016 to March 2019 to explore new media application in religion. A part of that study focused on the use of bumper stickers to communicate religious messages in public spaces. For these, two research assistants were tasked to photograph bumper stickers that they found on cars at shopping malls, church premisses and any other public gathering in Botswana. Entry into each of these places was first sought with the authorities/gatekeepers. The gatekeepers would then communicate with security guards at the parking areas who would allow the researchers to look for cars which they deem relevant to photograph. Sampling of cars selected for data collection was based on the following: the car should have a religious bumper sticker pasted on it, parked at any of the local shopping complex, church or places of public gathering selected as study sites, and registered within Botswana. Prior to photographing, the researchers would seek for permission from the car owners and once granted they would then undertake to collect data. The digital photographs were then copied into a folder and analysis of data commenced. Moreover, follow-up interviews were conducted with a total of twenty car owners or drivers of selected cars. As part of selection and sampling, it was ensured that all the participants were either owners or drivers of a car with a bumper sticker, and were either affiliates or members of any church ministry/church. Interviews with these were semi-structured and questions that were asked focused mainly on addressing the following: the relevance of the bumper sticker for the ministry/church; detailed explanation about the message on the bumper sticker; the perceptions and satisfaction that the car owners had about the stickers; and the quality of communication catered for through this form of public discourse. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for data analysis. During analysis, emphasis was on occurring themes, and in some instances analysis for each bumper sticker would be done to consider both the aesthetic crafting and uniqueness of the message.

Religious Bumper Stickers Found on Cars in Botswana

A total of twenty-nine bumper stickers with different messages and designs were collected (through photographs). These included stickers ranging from those motivating congregants to those advertising the church/ ministry and present a message of God to the church in a particular year. For this paper, only the latter were analyzed and these were recognized through labels related or similar to textual inscriptions "*The year of.....*" and a supporting image(s) of the religious leader. Four of these messages were sampled for this paper, and these were for the following churches/ministries: Passover Living Lamb Ministries International, Worship Embassy Church, Elements of Glory Revival Church, and

Prophet Keletso Moenda Ministries. Details about the visual presentations of these bumper stickers are presented in the next sections.

Passover Living Lamb Ministries International

The elements in the sticker included the logo for the religious ministry, a close-up image of the pastor in action – as though preaching, and the following inscription with a supporting biblical scripture “*2014 year of supernatural speed Acts 8:39*”, followed by another inscription and another supporting biblical scripture, seemingly presented as an instruction projected from the image of the pastor “*Get rid of the old yeast as you really are for Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed*” and scripture *I Corinth 5:7*.” The pastor is portrayed with formal clothing, and both red and white colours dominate the sticker. An interview with the female occupant of the car with this sticker revealed that their church’s focus is to inform people about the need for salvation and keeping their lives pure. When asked to reveal why the pastor’s image and red colour dominate in the sticker, she stated that:

My pastor is a serious preacher, and the owner of the ministry. Without him there is no such ministry as Passover Living Lamb Ministries International. As with the red colour, it resonates with our key message for this year, which is the power of the blood of the pass-over lamb.

The key features of the sticker include the serious image of the pastor seemingly preaching to the people in the car following the one with the sticker. In addition, there is the name of the ministry in bold blue letters on a red background and the pastor’s contact details.

Worship Embassy Church

For Worship Embassy Church, the sticker is designed to evidence a field with plenty of harvest, the logo of the church, and a portrait image of the pastor in formal clothing. The pastor is presented as though looking towards an audience. Also, clearly visible is an inscription “*the year of great harvest & prosperity*” with the following words ‘*Year*’, ‘*Harvest*’ and ‘*Prosperity*’ bolded in military green colour. The name “*Prophet Ishmael Rantleru*” (name of the religious leader) is also clearly evident below the name of the church and its logo. Interviews were conducted with two occupants of the vehicle with this sticker, first to seek clarification with regard to their religious affiliation, the satisfaction they get from using the sticker, and the meaning of the sticker. This this is what they each had to say:

Our church is on mission, while we also embrace prosperity as a ministry. We don't expect our people to be poor. So our message to the public (audience) is that they should come and benefit the fruits of prosperity.

My prophet is the owner of the ministry; hence he is presented on the sticker. He is the brand of the ministry. He ever prays for us and with his image pasted on our car, we are always covered (protected) against all forms of evil.

Interestingly, this sort of sticker did not depict the year referred to, making it difficult for the researcher to make sense of the message. The interviewees seemed also confused as to the year referred to in the sticker as they speculated it could either be 2016 or 2017.

Elements of Glory Revival Church

The sticker for this church shows the close-up image of the pastor and a female. Interestingly, of the four bumper stickers selected for this study, the one from this Church is the only one with the image of a female, probably the wife of the pastor. There is also in the center of the sticker an inscription "2016 the year of God" followed by a scripture *Isaiah 61*, and another cursive written text "Taking you to your divine destiny". What seems to be the church logo is presented in the top left corner of the sticker. The background image in the sticker shows several images of scrolls and a central image of a bright shining light echoing rays of rainbow colours to resemble a glorious appearance. Clearly presented information about the church contact details, including physical addresses, and a list of telephone numbers, sits on a gold bottom strip. Also, at the bottom right corner are logos of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. However, addresses directing the audiences to these social networks are missing from the sticker.

Prophet Keletso Moenda Ministries

Like the rest of the stickers, the sticker for this ministry also showed the image of Prophet Keletso. There is an inscription "2019 The year of come back" in bold green coloured font and "the bigger your challenges the greater your destiny," presented slightly smaller than the top text. At the bottom of the inscription there is the name of the Prophet and the logo of the ministry. These elements are presented on a green background. Interestingly, like some of the stickers, the same sticker was found on several cars, and it occurred that during data collection, three people were interviewed in relation to it. When asked to comment about the significance of this sticker and its visual elements, two of the study participants pointed out that:

Prophet Moenda is a true man of God. He has a powerful covering (protection) so much that with just his image on your car one is protected from evil. So we put this sticker (referring to the one on their car) on our cars for security reasons.

This sticker is a good brand for our ministry. It focuses on our mission as a church and reminds us to keep going despite the challenges.

The third participant commented thus:

The message on the sticker is in line with Prophet Moenda's preaching this year. He motivates us not to be weary of the challenges, for such propel us to become strong Christians.

The key highlights on the sticker include the image of the prophet holding a bible and a microphone as if preaching. Although taken at medium close up, the image of the Prophet is dressed in formal attire, with neatly combed hair looking towards the right side of the sticker where there is bold in scripted text.

Discussions

The visual analysis of the four bumper stickers emphasises the overall ideology of each church. The analysis which was based on the meaning of the aesthetic elements within each sticker, and the key messages displayed, indicated at least three very distinct factors with regard to religious bumper stickers in Botswana: that there is burgeoning cultural construct, denominational positioning and growing trend to brand a denomination and extol its leader. The influx of religious bumper stickers in Botswana, including their overall presentation – on cars, average sizes and visual elements demonstrate some form of cultural construct. This culture is widely played out on cars to underscore Fiske's (1989) point of a car being a "speech act." The key factor is the sort of bilingual practice for each ministry with a presence in Botswana to reach the public through a bumper sticker. The aesthetic elements and usage of specific signs in religious bumper stickers constitutes a structured form of communication whose intricate message is intended to create a community that includes the bumper sticker users, the audience who reads the message and the players who are the point of focus in the message. In this way, the bumper stickers users are the channels of communication, played effectively through their cars. The audience includes members of the public, who are targeted with messages on the bumper stickers, which as Bloch (2000) pointed out are made openly accessible in the public sphere. The point of focus in the stickers includes the religious leaders and the denominations they lead. The aesthetic elements in the stickers are similarly cataloged to showcase the name of the ministry and its logo, display the key message in the center of the sticker with a supporting scripture, and image of the pastor, or religious leader and contact details. As Case (1992) suggested, bumper stickers present a lot of messages for public notices. An expectation is that this sort of cultural practice may in the long run spread to many religious ministries in Botswana, because the goal of each church is to reach as many members of the public and communicate with them about its beliefs.

All the four stickers have a direct message to the public presented in various ways: through the images of the pastors/ religious leaders, inscription text, and other visual elements such as background

colours and texture. In each of the stickers a logo is provided as a form of identity for the church and pastor. Considering that the quest for each denomination is to attract membership, the use of bumper stickers in this way demonstrates some form of denomination positioning. For each sticker, audience responses are stimulated, first through bold inscription, serious image of the prophet or religious leader, and the contacts details in case the audience may want to link-up with either the church or its religious leader. Also, with each sticker, even though the message is for the general public, evidence shows that the message is denominational. The originator of the message is the religious leader, who in this case is presented as a modest man but with great authority. For example, stickers for *Prophet Keletso Moenda Ministries* and *Passover Living Lamb Ministries International*, the images of the two religious leaders are presented as though they are preaching, one extending his hand high and the other holding a microphone and a bible (symbols of authority as preachers). Furthermore, the name of each ministry and its logo as shown in the stickers underscore a unique brand and identity of each religious ministry in society.

In addition to the branding of denominations through car stickers, this study has also demonstrated that religious leaders are presented as the main visual element in the sticker. The images of the religious leader show an individual who is a strong leader, modest and smart to lead a religious congregation. These features are evidenced through clean and neat apparel, the seeming act of preaching and the size of the image in relation to the size of the sticker. Moreover, it is apparent that the message presented is coming from the religious leaders, rendering them as eloquent motivational speakers with significant interest to sustain the public the sticker is intended for.

Other elements in the sticker such as colour, background strip and texture are extensions presented just to help the message and other visual elements to come out strongly. This demonstrates how signs and meanings as portrayed in bumper stickers are an effective mode of religious communication.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the aesthetic elements in religious bumper stickers in Botswana. The study findings reveal that several churches / ministries utilise bumper stickers as forms of public discourse to communicate their messages. In the process, there are many forms of meanings built around visual and textual elements in the stickers. This study not only informs our understanding of the cultural religious practices in Botswana, but also exposes the factors active in the process. As demonstrated in the paper, through the use of bumper stickers, the positions of both a religious ministry/denomination and its leader (s) are flaunted, demonstrating a cultural trend associated with denominational positioning within a burgeoning yet saturated religious setting with many denominations whose quest to gain followers exposes their superfluous differences. An anecdotal finding in the study is that of gender identity. Although one of the stickers had a display of a woman accompanying a man, it has been

observed that in most cases men are often the common point of focus. More related studies are needed to examine this further and establish any gender contours in studies of religious bumper stickers. More of these studies should be designed to examine the crafting of textual messages, and the signification of visual symbols so as to orient our understanding of the impact of bumper stickers on the audience for which each message is intended.

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