Research Application Summary

Reception analysis and popularity of American action movies in Kampala, Uganda

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Abstract

This study set out to examine the meaning that young working class men living in Kampala, Uganda, make of American action movies in *Bibanda,* informal video-viewing halls. The study examined the ways in which these meanings may contribute to particular forms of working class masculinity in the contested contemporary African urban setting. *Bibanda* are temporary structures made of wood, papyrus and iron sheets constructed to show movies, a phenomenon that is rapidly growing in Uganda and other parts of Africa. These *Bibanda* are subject to intense scrutiny from moral authorities for the supposed effects they have on young men because of their frequent attendance. Working within a Cultural Studies framework, this research draws on an audience and reception analysis, involving focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with young men between 18-35 years who frequent *Bibanda*. The findings indicate that the popularity of American action movies in *Bibanda* are hinged on their ability to provide symbolic distancing to these young men from their constrained lived experience. This in turn contributes to the formation of marginal male identities centred on *Bibanda,* which provide a sense of belonging in addition to restoring these young men's masculinity. The findings also reveal that there is constant competition between the notions of modernity and traditionalism during the consumption of American action movies by the young men. We argue that the influence of the American action movies on the young men is not a straightforward "effect" but rather provoke a complex negotiation in which local and western notions of masculinity are re-worked to suit the uncertainties of urban life in which these young men are obliged to live out their (marginalised) lives.

Key words: *Bibanda*, gender, masculinity, youth

Résumé

Cette étude visait à examiner le sens que les jeunes hommes de la classe ouvrière vivant à Kampala, en Ouganda, font des films d'action américains en *Bibanda*, salles informelles de visualisation de vidéos. L'étude a examiné les façons dont ces significations peuvent contribuer à des formes particulières de travail de la classe masculine dans le milieu urbain africain contemporain contestée. Les *Bibanda* sont des structures temporaires faites en bois, en

papyrus et en tôles métalliques construites pour montrer des films, un phénomène qui se développe rapidement en Ouganda et dans d'autres régions d'Afrique. Ces *Bibanda* font l'objet d'un examen minutieux des autorités morales pour les effets supposés qu'ils ont sur les jeunes hommes en raison de leur fréquente participation. En travaillant dans un cadre d'études culturelles, cette recherche se fonde sur l'analyse du public et de la réception, impliquant des discussions de groupes et des entrevues en profondeur avec des jeunes hommes entre 18-35 ans qui fréquentent *Bibanda*. Les résultats indiquent que la popularité des films d'action américains en *Bibanda* sont articulés sur leur capacité à fournir une distanciation symbolique à ces jeunes hommes de leur contrainte d'expérience vécue. Cela, au retour, contribue à la formation des identités masculines marginales centrées sur les *Bibanda*, qui fournissent un sentiment d'appartenance, en plus de la restauration de la masculinité de ces jeunes hommes. Les résultats révèlent également qu'il existe une concurrence constante entre les notions de modernité et du traditionalisme au cours de la consommation de films d'action américains par les jeunes hommes. Nous soutenons que l'influence des films d'action américains sur les jeunes hommes ne sont pas un "effet" simple mais plutôt provoquer une négociation complexe dans lequel les notions locales et occidentales de la masculinité sont retravaillées pour répondre aux incertitudes de la vie urbaine dans laquelle ces jeunes les hommes sont obligés de mener leur vie (marginalisée).

Mots clés: les *Bibanda*, le sexe, la masculinité, la jeunesse

Background

Bibanda are temporary structures made of wood, papyrus and iron sheets constructed to show movies, a phenomenon that is rapidly growing in Uganda and other parts of Africa. *Bibanda* are located in densely populated areas and have become a lucrative business (Marshfield and van Oosterhout, 2005; Achen and Openjuru, 2012). However, since their initial emergence in the1980s *Bibanda* have evolved from temporary to more permanent structures (Yose, 2013). Kampala is the video hall capital of Uganda, with more than 1200 *Bibanda* (Bergenwall, 2012). Most content shown consists of western movies, specifically Hollywood action, football matches, martial arts, and more recently Nigerian and Bollywood movies (Achen and Openjuru, 2012). *Bibanda* emerged as popular venues for communal entertainment due to lack of individual access to television (Marshfield and van Oosterhout, 2005), and they attract a clientele of mostly young men, who use these spaces to socialise. However, *Bibanda* have become a battlefield between the male youth and moral authorities in Uganda. Churches for instance, condemn the halls as a danger to the moral welfare of the youth (Marshfield and van Oosterhout, 2005).

Generally, urban Ugandan low-income earning youth are represented in the media as affected by poverty, inadequate education and skills, limited work opportunities, exploitation, civil unrest and gender discrimination (National Youth Policy, 2001). Most young people are seen by society as being influenced by western culture through the media (National Youth Policy, 2001). As a result, they are regarded as a generation with no clear cultural identity or values, and in conflict with society and established structures (National Youth Policy, 2001). The language used to refer to young men, particularly low-income earners living in urban areas,

is pejorative, such as *Abayaye* (lumpens/rogues) (Baker and Ricardo, 2005; Staples, 2007). Such terms constitute them as the "other" in relation to which positive Ugandan identities are constituted (Frankland, 2007).

Young men, then, face severe social sanctions, which are compounded by their status as unmarried men, particularly if unemployed. Uganda is a heterogeneous, traditionally patriarchal and heterosexist society (Coughrty, 2011), with gender roles clearly defined in traditional culture. Here, masculinity remains strongly tied to the breadwinner identity with financial independence, material achievement and sexual activity seen as significant concepts of manhood in Uganda (Baker and Ricardo, 2005; Mugambe, 2007). Both masculinity and femininity are rigidly defined and non-compliance is rarely tolerated (Nyanzi *et al.*, 2009; (Coughtry, 2011).

Literature Summary

The effect of global media on local audiences has been a focal point of research for many media theorists (see for example, Boyd-Barrett 1977; Schiller, 1991). Like most African countries, Uganda has had an influx of global movies mainly American which can be attributed to Uganda's poor movie industry. Such consumption forms the basis of the criticism, which is that foreign media provide the means by which to extend western imperialism (Rasmussen, 2010). This extension of western imperialism via the media is referred to as "media imperialism". The central argument made by media imperialism theorists is that global media lead to "westernisation" of local culture on the assumption that the media exerts direct effects on society (Strelitz, 2005; Movius, 2010). A key critique of the media imperialism thesis is Thompson's notion of "symbolic distancing". He argues that part of the attraction of global media for local audiences is that their consumption often provides meanings which enable "...the accentuation of symbolic distancing from the spatial- temporal contexts of everyday life" (Thompson, 1995). Strelitz (2003) provides an example of such "symbolic distancing" for South African youth through "...media representation of Afro-Americans, which helped, puncture the reality of being black in South Africa". The media enabled South African youth to imagine a life different from their lived experiences by seeing Afro-Americans succeeding which was different from their lived conditions were whites succeed more often (Strelitz, 2003). This provided motivation for the youth to imagine themselves as being able to succeed. Furthermore, the Media imperialism thesis is criticised by researchers who argue that third world audiences are not passive media consumers but make meanings of global media messages according to their own realities (Ang, 1982; Fiske, 1987). This "ethnographic turn" in audience studies focuses on understanding how the context of reception shapes the audience's response to the text.

The audience ethnography approach offers a means to discover and examine how people experience global media messages in everyday life (Young, 2000; Murphy and Kraidy, 2003). It exemplifies a general shift in media research towards understanding the reception of media messages and investigating "what popular audiences are doing with the cultural products they consume in their everyday lives" (Skovmand and Schroder, 1992; Strelitz, 2003).

Research in African settings has shown that popular culture forms are sites of struggle in which negotiation of gender, race and other identities take place (Strelitz, 2005). This research is particularly concerned with the construction of masculinity, and the approach in this study is informed by constructivist approaches to gender as socially constructed. In this perspective, masculinities and femininities are not fixed but constructed through social interaction (Connell, 2002). It draws on Connell's (2009) model of the "gender order" in which she argues that society constructs notions of masculinity and femininity through power relations. Central to Connell's definition of masculinity is the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type but rather is that form of masculinity that occupies a dominant place in a given pattern of gender relations (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). While these are important constructions, Connell (2009) insists that hegemonic masculinities are contingent and subject to change. In an African context, traditional gender identities compete and interact with 'modern' constructs of gender. Africa's predicament revolves around the differences between modernists and communitarians, with the former calling for rights and the latter defending culture (Mamdani, 1996).

Study description

This research aimed to examine the meanings that young men make of American media within the specific social space of *Bibanda* and to interrogate the ways in which theses meanings may participate in the construction of masculinity in this contested contemporary African urban setting. A range of ethnographic research has been carried out by African researchers in relation to what young people do with foreign media (Strelitz, 2002; Assefa, 2005; Boshoff, 2006). It aimed to add to the existing literature of research on audience reception specifically the interpretations of American action movies by young men in *Bibanda.* Working within a cultural studies framework, this research draws on an audience reception analysis, involving focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with young men between 18-35 years who frequent *Bibanda*.

Research findings

Media theorists, who refute the media imperialism thesis, argue that the local audience social context plays a role in their negotiation of global media texts. Thompson (1995) for example, argues audiences are able to use media representations to gain an understanding of ways and conditions of life that differ from theirs. In this way, global media images can provide *a resource* for individuals to think critically about their own lives and life conditions (Thompson, 1995). The following extracts show how these young working class men achieve "symbolic distancing" through thinking about the truths in the action movies and how they can apply to their lived reality.

> Simon: As for myself, I like action movies a lot because sometimes they are real life stories so you become open minded to some things. These action movies are nice. I find action movies interesting because they have a lot of innovation. You can copy a lot from them but then you watch a Ugandan movie and you can tell you have more

brains than the movie. Western movies are nice; we find things we can learn from them.

Jeffrey: What I like about these men is the way they fight. The movies are sometimes true stories. I come to watch to forget my problems and pass time. I like expendables of Johnny Rambo because they send them to fight that is everything; they go to help Americans who have been held captive and bring the bad people to justice.

Akim: Me personally I like them because of the way they act, they make a movie interesting. I like the One by Jet Li, I like it because it had a lot of interesting action. He fought nicely and the way he helped people. Ugandan men do not know anything. The Americans are very skilled. Those men are fit and strong, when they fight you can see strength but here they only know how to cut down trees for charcoal.

The American action movie consumption helps these young working class men think and understand their life experiences by reflecting on the stories with in these action movies in comparison to Ugandan movies and how they do or do not apply to their lived experience. Further, the above extracts also show the connection of the American action movies to the construction of a particular masculinity by the young working class men.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) discussion on hegemonic masculinity inform the difficult negotiation of local and western notions of masculinity that these young men are faced with. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that hegemonic masculinity is not only in relation to the domination of women but also to subordinated masculinities. This concept illustrates how men have different positions that include support, subordination or rejection of different access of men to power over women and other men based on their identities, relationships, power and patriarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Jeffrey: If someone is fearful, I do not consider him a man. If he has been arrested in the *Kibanda* and he goes with one heart and not sacred then I will call him a real man because I do not associate fear with men. You also have to get married and take care of your wife and have a job where you work and you do not look bad in that everyone who sees you as a man sees that you look after yourself and you are not a thief.

Akim: Responsibility that he has is what makes him a man. Not everyone who puts on long trousers is a man, there are people who put on long trousers and think they are men when they are not. You must have a wife and a home, which is yours and sometimes you can have a car to be called a man here in Kampala.

Richard: Personally, when I had a child, my mother said I am now a man. She said we must part and I get a place to stay by myself so now I am a man. I moved in and now I support my family. I like being in Kampala. First, you must have where to stay, a job and responsibility. For example if you have a wife at home and people trust you, it makes it easy for you to get something you need at work of home.

Although men benefit from patriarchy, it should not be ignored that a hierarchy within masculinities exists which is evident from the responses given by the young men (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Morrell *et al.*, 2013). The above extracts show that these young men are aware and conform to society expectations by noting that a successful career and a family is what it means to be a man. Important to note is the fact that most of these young men do not fit into this norm even though they aspire to. The jobs they take part in are frowned upon by society and hardly earn enough to support a family. This makes it difficult for them to find partners. This leads to marginalisation because women and their fellow men subordinate them due to the life they live. This makes these young men feel powerless leading to their attraction of American action movies in the *Bibanda* where they feel safe from the expectations of society forming association bonds with their peers who are also living marginal lives.

Conclusion

The *Bibanda* are seen as a sanctuary for the young men who feel free and safe away from the social pressures and expectations of society. In here subordinated masculinities exist and these young men are able to cope with society and it is through such spaces that a new male identity is constructed, a marginal identity. This shows that *Bibanda* are not only preferred because of the low entry cost but also because this shared space is linked to their marginal identity. Through this marginal identity, a new sense of belonging is born within the young men who feel ostracised by the society that rejects and does not respect them as men.

Acknowledgement

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