



Hipatia Press
www.hipatiapress.com



Instructions for authors, subscriptions and further details:

<http://csc.hipatiapress.com>

Microfinance, Digital Media and Social Change: A Visual Analysis of Kiva.org

Franklin Nii Amankwah Yartey¹

1) University of Dubuque. United States of America

Date of publication: October 1st, 2013

Edition period: October 2013 - January 2014

To cite this article: Yartey, F.N. (2013). Microfinance, Digital Media and Social Change: a Visual Analysis of kiva.org. *Communication & Social Change*, 1(1), 63-89 doi: 10.4471/csc.2013.04

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4471/csc.2013.04>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

The terms and conditions of use are related to the Open Journal System and to Creative Commons Non-Commercial and Non-Derivative License.

Microfinance, Digital Media and Social Change: a Visual Analysis of Kiva.org

Franklin Nii Amankwah Yartey
University of Dubuque

(Received: 11 July 2013; Accepted: 2 August 2013; Published: 1 October 2013)

Abstract

Using theoretical frameworks from Appadurai, (1990); Nakamura, (2008); and Gajjala and Birzescu, (2010), this study employs visual analysis to examine the communication processes used in acquiring loans for people of low socio-economic status in developing countries. Images and narratives on online microfinance site, kiva.org, were examined in this study. The results suggest that though online microfinance through web 2.0 communication technologies is helping the poor, by providing people who otherwise would not have access to loan products with financial services, many of the so-called “poorest of the poor” do not have direct access to global communication tools used to represent them on sites such as kiva. This study suggests that the representation of borrowers from developing countries is riddled with representational issues.

Keywords: Kiva, microfinance, globalization, digital media, social change

Micro-créditos, Medios Digitales y Cambio Social: Un Análisis Visual de Kiva.org

Franklin Nii Amankwah Yartey
University of Dubuque

(Recibido: 11 de julio de 2013; Aceptado: 2 de agosto de 2013; Publicado: 1 de octubre de 2013)

Resumen

Utilizando los marcos teóricos que ofrecen Appadurai (1990); Nakamura (2008); y Gajjala y Birzescu (2010), este estudio emplea el análisis visual para examinar los procesos comunicativos utilizados en la adquisición de créditos por parte de personas de países en desarrollo con un estatus socio-económico bajo. Imágenes y narraciones del sitio online sobre micro- créditos, kiva.org, han sido examinados en este estudio. Los resultados sugieren que aunque las tecnologías web 2.0 están ayudando a las personas pobres ofreciéndoles un acceso a servicios de préstamo que de otra manera no habría sido posible, muchos de los también llamados 'los más pobres entre los pobres' no tienen acceso directo a las herramientas de comunicación global que se utilizan para representarles a ellos y ellas en espacios web como kiva.org. Este estudio sugiere que la representación de prestatarios de los países en vías de desarrollo está minada de problemas en cuanto a su representatividad.

Palabras clave: Kiva, microcrédito, globalización, medios digitales, cambio social

Abena Tawiah cooks banku [a Ghanaian delicacy made from fermented corn dough, often served with hot soup] for sale in Jukwa. She is married and blessed with four wonderful children. Her husband is a mason. She assists her husband in taking care of the home. Her loan will be used to buy more bags of maize for the making of the banku and other source ingredients. She hopes to use new earnings from her business to save to build a house (kiva.org: Abena Tawiah, 2010)

Figure 1 of Abena was taken as she serves patrons. The image shows Abena in the middle, grinning with pride as she prepares food for her customers.



Figure 1: Abena Tawiah preparing banku for her costumers. Retrieved from: http://www.kiva.org/lend/189441?_tpos=19&_tpg=2

The narrative above is from kiva.org, a microfinance lending site that facilitates loans to help the poor like Abena Tawiah. The description implies that due to her loan, Abena made progress with her business. The Internet and web 2.0 technologies have revolutionized global lending. Microfinance institutions (MFIs) worldwide can now raise money via the Internet and instantly make these funds available to entrepreneurs like Abena in

developing countries. Kiva.org is a peer-to-peer lending microfinance institution that provides loan services to entrepreneurs in third world countries and other parts of the world. Kiva invites loans from ordinary citizens of the Global North on its website, which are then accessed by their nongovernmental organization (NGO) partners in various countries. These funds are given to qualified entrepreneurs who are described as the poorest of the poor by Kiva. This paper critically examines Kiva's website through the lens of transnational and globalization theories. It explores the communication processes of microfinance through web 2.0 media technologies.

This study examines not only how microfinance, through digital media, is bringing social change to developing countries, but also some of the issues associated with empowering the poor through digital technologies. The implicit and explicit representational choices made by Kiva of its borrowers on their website impacts how audiences frame these borrowers, underscoring the limitations and the paradox of empowering the underprivileged through web 2.0 online technologies. My analysis of Kiva's representational practices is not an attempt to disrepute its mission or devalue viable outcomes in empowering the poor, but rather to problematize and complicate the discursive practices of empowering the poor through web 2.0 communication technologies. The paper starts by laying the foundation for popular elucidations of microfinance and how it has evolved to include global online lending as a tool for empowering the poor. This work is situated as a case study of Kiva.org, presented by one who has been immersed on Kiva's website for the past four years.

Literature Review

For the past 60 years, humankind has been trying to find solutions to poverty in the developing world (Holcombe, 1995). Scholars and microenterprise development practitioners have been exploring ways to bring poverty relief and empowerment to millions of people worldwide. Microfinance has provided some essential solutions to poverty and empowerment in developing countries. It has also brought about positive social change to many communities globally. Microfinance has taken on a transnational trajectory (Ohanyan, 2007), and millions of people worldwide designated as the "poorest of the poor" have benefitted from microfinance products provided by MFIs locally and internationally. Nobel Peace Prize winner, Mohammad Yunus, is credited for the microfinance movement, which began in the villages of Bangladesh in the 1970s (Holcombe, 1995) through the

Grameen Bank. Following is a discussion of microfinance models, transnational lending in light of web 2.0 communication technologies, Kiva.org, and the communication issues associated with transnational lending.

Microfinance Models

Grameen Bank, founded by Mohammad Yunus, used landlessness as criteria to identify poverty in society and to determine loan eligibility. Many microfinance institutions (MFI) worldwide currently follow the Grameen Bank model. This model was created with the assumption that the poor already have the skills but lack the necessary capital to start a viable business enterprise. Mohammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank filled this gap in the lives of rural poor, some of who were also landless. The Grameen model is based on small-scale rural credit that utilizes methods of group lending.

For example, a group of four to six women will come together and approach Grameen Bank for a loan. The women go through a series of processes (Holcombe, 1995). They must first enroll in Grameen's continuous training program, in which they learn the rules and regulations for Grameen loan recipients. Entrenched in the program are the Sixteen Decisions developed by Grameen that the women have to learn and be tested on before being accepted as members. Among these rules are: (1) Adhering to principles of Grameen Bank, which are Unity, Courage and Hard Work; (2) Agreeing to bring prosperity to their families; (3) Agreeing not to live in run-down houses but rather repairing and constructing new houses to live in; (4) Agreeing not to take any dowry in their sons' weddings or give away dowry in their daughters' weddings, and also not to practice child marriage; (5) agreeing not to inflict social injustice on anyone. These are part of the sixteen decisions that the women have to promise to abide by; they cannot become members of Grameen Bank and receive loans if they do not promise to follow the sixteen rules (Holcombe, 1995).

Once the program is complete, a loan is given out to one person in the group. It is the responsibility of all members to make sure that the loan is paid back in a timely fashion. Five percent of each loan granted goes to a *loan fund*, a reserve that members fall back on in emergency situations. Once the first loan has been fully paid back, the next member is automatically eligible for a loan, and the process continues till everyone in the group has received a loan. The group leader is normally the last person to receive a loan.

The Grameen model is thus group-based; it relies on pre-existing skills of applicants. The goal of Grameen is to provide needed capital for women to engage in visible and viable microenterprises to help sustain their families and most importantly, to bring about empowerment through land ownership. The loan also provides an opportunity for women to make the sixteen decisions a reality by sending their children to school and engaging in various self-help activities (Holcombe, 1995). The Grameen Bank requires weekly payments instead of annual payments, which ensure low default rates (Holcombe, 1995).

There are a few other microfinance models being followed around the world. Some of these are peer group lending (Berenbach & Guzman, 1994; Ito, 2003), also referred to as the solidarity group model of lending, and the Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs). These remain the dominant models used globally.

There are, however, numerous private local *savings collectors* who visit markets collecting money from traders. An example of this can be found in the West African country Ghana, where Susu money collectors visit market places and homes, collecting savings. Money collectors are mostly men who collect money from traders with the intention of paying them a lump sum while retaining a day's worth of collections for their services after a period of time (Williams, 2006). There is also a variant of this in the Caribbean where participants throw a hand of weekly or fortnightly wages to other members of the Susu team, each receiving a full hand of all participants' monies on a rotating basis. This is similar to the ROSCA model described below.

The ROSCA model has existed for generations, a group of people who know each other come together and contribute money to a common pool of resources. Group members are required to make regular contributions to the *pot* of money, and following the rotating cycle, the *pot* is then given to one member of the group. At the end of three months, the recipient can then use the money for what s/he wants, either to buy more produce to sell at the market, or more raw materials for a business. The contributions must, however, go on until all group members have received their lump sum of money, which means the group must ensure that all members remain in the group even if they have received their money (Ito, 2003).

Next is the solidarity-lending framework, which was modeled after Grameen Bank. It involves three to ten micro-entrepreneurs who come together to secure microcredit services, including training and organizational structuring (Berenbach & Guzman, 1994). The group as a unit pledges that they will pay back money loaned to them. If they fail to pay back a loan, it

automatically affects disbursement of future loans: a microfinance institution may refuse to provide future loans to groups that default.

Description of Site (Kiva.org)

Kiva was established in 2005 with a mission to help reduce poverty globally. The organization is informed by three rationales: (1) People are by nature generous, and will help others if given the opportunity to do so in a transparent, accountable way; (2) The poor are highly motivated and can be very successful when given an opportunity; (3) By connecting people, we can create relationships beyond financial transactions and build a global community expressing support and encouragement of one another (kiva.org). These beliefs remain what the organization strives to achieve through its lending platform. As of 2005 Kiva has facilitated over 400 million dollars in loans. Kiva is made up of a community of lenders and borrowers. Lenders come from diverse countries including but not limited to Belgium, the United States, Australia, Germany, Spain, and England. Borrowers also come from various countries including Ghana, Zambia, and Sierra Leone. Lenders are given the option to lend to either a male or female loan applicant, or to a person or group under a specific industry. For example, one can lend to individuals or groups in Agriculture, Arts, Construction, Education, Housing, Food, or Transportation sectors, depending on the interests of lenders. The use of web 2.0 social plug-ins such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook is evident on kiva.org. Various technologies are used to share information between lenders and borrowers. The United States has one of the largest Internet users (Ha, 2007), second to China. Kiva.org receives millions of dollars from lenders in the United States and around the world. A loan is given out to a prospective entrepreneur every 17 seconds, 3,333 new lenders joined Kiva during the week that this section of the paper was written, and over one million dollars of loans were given out in the same week (Kiva homepage). As a digital social space on the World Wide Web, Kiva.org provides different levels of interactivity for its users. According to Kiva there are over 400 Kiva fellows worldwide who serve as links between local NGOs and Kiva. Kiva fellows perform translation services and translate borrowers' stories to English before they are uploaded to kiva.org. These translation services have representational issues.

During the translation process inevitable filtering processes take place because the means of media production are placed in the hands of a few who have access to technologies (Nakamura, 2008). Kiva fellows and lenders represent those that have direct access to technologies. From the 1960s to the

1980s, social movements had a different focus; today social movements are more dedicated to identity formation online (Atkinson, 2008; Best, 2005; Huesca, 2001; Stengrim, 2005; Owens & Palmer, 2003; Pickard, 2006). Citizens of the transnational public sphere as seen on kiva.org are encouraged to get online and give to the poor in developing countries; they are enticed through different interactive features available on kiva.org—visuals, text and pictures that add to subtle immediacies the internet provides to its users. These are all unveiled in the processes of gazing at profile pictures, reading short biographies of prospective borrowers, filling out forms, and watching short video reports on kiva.org. These processes make up characteristics of new social movements—people are actively engaged with others online by reading profiles of prospective borrowers and directly lending money to them with a click of a mouse. With a click, they may change the lives of people they have never met. These are some of the features of new social movements as reflected in online lending.

Transnational Lending

The rise of transnational inter-organizational networks has revolutionized global lending, which has also led to an innovative response to global problems like poverty (Ohanyan, 2007). A rural farmer in Namibia is able to borrow money to buy seeds for his/her farm from local MFIs and international lending organizations like Kiva. The Internet has evolved into the near perfect marketing tool for many organizations worldwide. Kiva uses the Internet to bring prospective borrowers and lenders together for social and financial exchanges. For example, Abena the banku seller in Ghana, could expand her business by physically going to one of the local Kiva non-governmental microfinance partner organizations in Ghana. She narrates her story to this organization—her story may consist of who she is, why she needs the money, when she needs the money, and what she will do with it. A Kiva fellow (Kiva fellows are volunteers, primarily college graduates from the United States) then takes a picture of Abena and types out her story, ensuring that all important key phrases that will interest lenders in giving her a loan (e.g. family, education, why she needs the loan, etc.) are included in the description. The Kiva fellow then uploads Abena's picture and biography on kiva.org. Citizens from the United States, Britain, Germany and many other Western nations visit kiva.org, where they browse various profiles of prospective borrowers and lend to those that match their personal requirements for lending. An amount as low as \$25 dollars can then be loaned to a prospective borrower with a click from a computer or a

smartphone. Borrowers are required to pay back the money; however, the lender has the option to withdraw the money when it is paid back or continue to re-lend the money to someone else in need. It is thus a continuous cycle of lending that goes on as long as there are people who need money and those who can lend.

The system of global lending is not a simple process, but rather a complex exchange of goods and services globally (Abe, 2009; Allison, 2009; Appadurai, 1990; Cetina & Preda, 2007; Dempsey, 2009). It involves simple and convoluted systems of communication between international lending organizations and local microfinance organizations (Dempsey, 2009). There are rules, regulations, and assessment procedures established by various international lenders (Buckley, 1997; Gallardo, Ouattara, Randhawa & Steel, 2005; Hulme, 2000; Park & Ren, 2001; Mosley & Hulme, 1998; Rozas, 2009; Hudon, 2008). Many MFIs worldwide are constantly exploring ways to survive and become self-sustaining. The literature available suggests that donor demands are high, and MFIs are asked by donors to broaden their outreach and serve the more economically disadvantaged in society (Steel, Randhawa, Ouattara & Gallardo, 2005). Microfinance over the last 20 years has become a tool for poverty alleviation globally, with NGO partners worldwide helping to bring economic relief to the poor in developing countries. The next section discusses how some of these MFIs are assessed.

Assessing Microfinance Institutions

Steel, Randhawa, Ouattara & Gallardo, (2005) asserted that in countries like Ghana and Tanzania, though microfinance institutions are registered legally, there is no supervision or regulation of these institutions. Thus standards for MFIs are not similar to other banking institutions. This does not mean donors or international partners do not have requirements for these NGOs. Kiva, for example, severed relationships with some of its NGO partners in Ghana: the Kraban Support Foundation (KSF) was shut down when Kiva discovered irregularities in the application of Kiva's policies (kiva.org: KSF, 2011). Kiva assesses its field partners on their re-payment rates. Obtaining loans from donors requires transparency and a good financial structure coupled with good credit rating (Nieto, 2005). Sites like *Ravelry* are reputation-based economies, where users rate each other based on their contributions (Humphreys, 2009). The online status system on Kiva displays ratings for Kiva borrowers and institutions. Lenders review borrower and institution ratings before they lend money. In Mexico, ACCION

international network charges borrowers very high interest rates, which has enabled it to receive high ratings (Hudon, 2008). The best practices of microfinance (Srinivas, 2011) indicate that recipients of donor money must strive to manage finances efficiently, encourage transparency, serve the poor, and adopt good reporting standards. For most MFIs following donor demands can be a daunting task, since they need to find ways to sustain themselves in a competitive market environment.

Meeting Donor Demands/Issues

Some local MFIs are struggling to sustain themselves. Aboagye (2009) identifies that issues facing microfinance institutions include inadequate loan recovery, incompetence on the part of some MFI management, disbursement of unauthorized funds, fraud, embezzlement, neglect by board members and directors, shady accounting procedures, and failure in submitting prudential returns. Ghana's Western Region MFI's had the highest operating costs (Aboagye, 2009). Regulatory authorities and MFI institutions in Ghana lack appropriate technical expertise to regulate MFI institutions (Gallardo, Ouattara, Randhawa, & Steel 2005). According to Gallardo, Ouattara, Randhawa, and Steel (2005), this leads to strict requirements imposed on MFIs. Roy and Wheeler's (2006) survey of micro-finance institutions in Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Togo also revealed that the lack of training, market knowledge, and limited access to capital impedes the growth of the micro-enterprise sector in urban French West-Africa. Budget limitations can also influence the scope of a microfinance institution's outreach (Kotir & Obeng-Odoom, 2009). Buckley's (1997) study of Ghanaian MFIs suggested that in Ghana, a third of respondents identified loans from relatives and friends as major sources of funding when they set up businesses (Mayoux, 2001). According to Ohanyan (2007), the "network-based operation of NGOs" (p. 5) can be an advantage and disadvantage because network structure can erode state sovereignty by taking over some of the functions of the state. For example, certain services, such as banking, are considered the responsibility of the state. Yet it can also be an advantage because networks become support structures for states that have come out of turmoil and are in need of some form of credibility in the international arena. States that need recognition or image repair normally will associate themselves with an international NGO (Ohanyan, 2007). Several African countries are affiliated with the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other international agencies. The notion of the network state is reiterated by Ohanyan (2007) as an innovation that helps to strengthen the "global

administrative capacity of the nation state” (p. 13). Essentially, what occurs is instead of one single state governing its people, a network of transnational and international organizations and NGOs all contribute to “global governance” (Ohanyan, 2007, p. 13). The notion of global governance could also be related to the transnational public sphere (Bell, 2007; Conway & Singh, 2009; Cetina & Preda, 2007; Nash, 2007), or Fraser’s idea that the world is a social forum where communicative circuits, economies, and governance overflow boundaries of nations and states (Conway & Singh, 2009). An overflow occurs because a common means of communication is used and Kittler (2009) conceptualized this process as the use of a “universal medium of binary numbers” (p. 24) to transmit and store sounds, images, text, ideas and ideologies worldwide.

Method

A visual analysis was adopted for this study; the method entails examining and critiquing the meaning of visuals and text used in a visual culture (Nakamura, 2002; 2008; 2009). Images and text become artifacts that are analyzed for significance (Mirzoeff, 2009). A visual analysis was used because it provides the appropriate tools for deconstructing gender, racial and ethnic identity in digitally suggestive online practices (Nakamura, 2008). The objective was to critically examine visuals and text on Kiva’s website to determine how borrowers are represented on Kiva. A total of 24 images and narratives of borrowers from Kiva’s website were randomly selected using the “*Region*” selector on Kiva.org. Borrowers were from different countries in Africa. Out of the 24 borrower images and narratives, 12 were individual borrower images and 12 were group borrower images. Group and individual borrowers’ pictures were retrieved separately in Kiva’s database. To critically examine visuals selected, questions such as, “How are borrowers represented in these images?” “How are the images similar or different?” “What do these images communicate to audiences?” were asked. A profile picture of a Kiva lender was also analyzed and compared to borrower profiles. What follows is an analysis and discussion of a few profiles examined.

Analysis & Discussion

The transnational public sphere and the free flow of information through various global network structures is what Ohanyan (2007) conceptualized as the network state, the notion that nation states are not solely self-governing.

Due to transnational network structures that include local and international NGOs, international organizations, and other organizational networks, citizens in various nation states are provided services such as banking from local and international MFIs. Transnational microfinance socio-financial networks like Kiva are responding to global problems, such as poverty. Under normal circumstances, nation states are responsible for their own citizens, for implementing social policies, and providing banking and saving services. However, NGOs have taken over some of these responsibilities through services rendered to citizens globally. Given the global-scale financial crisis, socio-financial networks like kiva.org play a critical role in helping bring about social change by providing economic relief to millions of people worldwide. There is a transnational level of participation in socio-financial networks like kiva.

The post-Westphalian nature of today's public sphere allows for this open participation of nation states in the transnational web of microfinance (Nash, 2007). Kiva.org is one of the many transnational public spheres where donors and borrowers connect in a discursive space to participate in social and financial transactions. The concept of *transnational public sphere* as it relates to online microfinance can be theorized as a tangible virtual space where people congregate to develop online socio-financial relationships, share goodwill through microfinance, and establish connections that have potential of lasting a lifetime. The transnational public sphere is also a stage for performance; it is a public space where potential donors from the Global North provide financial relief to the poor in the Global South. It is a space where individuals and groups in Third World countries exhibit their eligibility for loans through various communication strategies. Images of prospective borrowers like Abena (See Figure 1) are displayed on kiva.org for lenders to peruse and select.

Scholars are exploring ways to theorize these complicated processes of global microfinance, various mass media processes, and the issues associated with this new phenomenon (Fork-Kintz, 2007; Gajjala & Birzescu, 2010; Keating, Rasmussen, & Rishi, 2010; Moodie, 2013; Nadesan, 2010; Sharma, 2008). There has been ongoing debate on whether transnational global processes pose serious challenges and threats to nation states around the globe (Asante, 2006; Parameswaran, 2008). The issues are, however, not black and white, but complex to theorize, given the constant changes and disjointed interactions between “ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 301). According to Appadurai, the flow of money, information, images, ideas, and ideologies, which form the nucleus of global cultural flows, travels through

dissimilar paths. Though scholars such as Appadurai (1990) and Fork-Klintz (2007) have suggested that it is difficult to theorize such complex transnational global processes, this study attempts to theorize the processes of global microfinance by re-visiting Appadurai's 1990 work to help understand today's transnational communication and the global, economic, and social processes that are taking place in complex network structures in the public sphere. The study thus represents an extension of Appadurai's *scapes* to include digital media through online microfinance.

Technoscapes & Finanscapes

Appadurai's *technoscapes* can be conceptualized as a technological public sphere that exists in cyberspace. This space consists of computers linked together by the fabric of the Internet with various inter-nodal connections that link up local microfinance institutions to Kiva.org in a sophisticated communication network. The *technoscapes* are web 2.0 technological tools for lenders who help bring social change by improving the lives of the poor through *finanscapes*. Finanscapes theoretically are paths that financial transactions flow to and from globally. The transfer of money through digital mediums like kiva.org to developing countries follows paths created by finanscapes and technoscapes. Muir (2008) argued that Appadurai ignored cultural forces that are introduced into new societies that become assimilated, localized and reproduced for consumption by locals. Muir (2008) however, builds on Appadurai's theoretical framework. There is an evolving playing field with regards to globalization and the various processes that go along with this phenomenon. It is apparent that cultural economic flows dither between *multiscapes* and that there is not a seamless flow to this phenomenon.

This paper argues that there are two realities to the arguments brought forth by Appadurai and Muir. First in light of present transnational globalization trends, cultural economies flounder; secondly, cultural economies also move seamlessly between *ethnoscapes*, *technoscapes*, *finanscapes*, *mediascapes* and *ideoscapes*. Thus, there is a degree of disconnectedness and connectedness between the *scapes* as theorized by Appadurai. Microfinance with its flow of money from the Global North to the Global South and vice-versa is a smooth and fragmented process. High interest rates are placed on loans before they are given out to prospective borrowers; borrowers like Abena have to go through specific vetting processes before receiving a loan. These communication processes are part of what Appadurai theorized as unbroken processes. However, this study argues that these processes can be uneven as well. The disjunctures of which

Appadurai theorizes, therefore, do not exist “within a dying paradigm” (Muir, 2008, p. 62) as Muir suggests, but rather within a complex and ever evolving paradigm.

Communicative Functions of Online Microfinance

The globalization of transnationalized microfinance services presents an interesting paradox. Kiva.org’s website can be described as an interactive, transnational, communicative space, where donors and borrowers virtually convene to fulfill mutually benefiting agendas. However, it is also a space where images of Third World bodies are consumed and negotiated by the Global North. For the borrower, receiving loans is crucial to survival, and for the lender there is the satisfaction of giving money to the poor. There is also a procurement of virtue facilitated through the commodification of the Third World borrower. Several communicative processes contribute to commodification of the borrower on kiva.org.

According to Gajjala, Birzescu and Yartey (2011), there is a linear flow of information consisting of a “three-layered mediation of the representation of the borrowers” (p. 226). The first layer entails selecting a prospective borrower who is deemed qualified for a loan by a local NGO. Abena Tawiah approaches a local NGO and shares a narrative with a local NGO partner. She tells her story to the NGO partner, which may include why she needs a loan, when she needs the money, and how she is going to use the loan. A Kiva fellow then writes up a description of what Abena narrated, which is the second layer of representation. This layer requires an understanding and interpretation of what Abena narrated, and the ability to recreate a literal form of this narration with words that will adequately sell and culturally match Abena, her needs and goals to potential lenders (Bob, 2005). The third layer of representation comes from the web 2.0 technologies that are used by Kiva fellows to upload Abena’s profile. These internet tools serve as filters that ultimately shape the final representation of Abena to global audiences. However, borrowers like Abena may not have access to these tools of representation, given the issues associated with the technological divide (Nakamura, 2008; Sooknanan, Melkote, & Skinner, 2002) and that not everyone has access to producing media discourses. These are some of the inadequacies of the public sphere that Fraser discusses (Bell, 2007), so what is missing in the final representation of Abena on Kiva? Are audiences being given accurate information? Is Abena able to directly participate in this communication process? What is edited or left out in the final representation of Abena? Why is it left out? Kiva uses highly scripted messages about

borrowers that raise many issues of representation pertaining to the need to commodify borrowers to lenders.



Figure 2: Mmassa Group. Retrieved July 1, 2013 from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/573942>.



Figure 3: Mahodo Group. Retrieved July 1, 2013 from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/575876>

Figures 2 and 3 show prospective borrowers from Zimbabwe and Benin. These images have similar visual cues. Figure 2 presents three men and a woman and Figure 3 shows three female borrowers. There are similarities between Figures 2 and 3. In each of these images we see one person's hand raised. This may be disconcerting to the viewer and also the short narratives beneath these images do not explain why these borrowers have their hands raised. The narrative provided by Kiva describing Figure 2 reads:

Greetings from Zimbabwe! This is 38 year-old Robert from Masvingo. He is married with four children, three of whom are attending school. Robert providing services as a photographer. The business has been in operation for 15 years. He says the main challenge he faces is that of stiff competition from other photographers. Robert has requested a loan of \$600 to buy an additional camera and cartridges. He says the extra income generated as a result of this loan will allow him to improve his family's welfare. In the future Robert plans to complete the shop he is building at a local business centre. (Mmassa Group, 2013)

This narrative describes Robert a 38-year-old family man seeking a loan to grow his business. Robert is not clearly identified in the picture. One is left to wonder if Robert is the gentleman on the left and why he has his hand raised. A Kiva representative explained that they ask group members to raise their hands so prospective lenders will know which borrower is being featured (Yancey, 2012). Robert was therefore asked to raise his hand to be identified by lenders. Asking borrowers to raise their hands, though Kiva is a well-meaning organization is problematic. By default these individuals are not being afforded dignified descriptions by being distinctly identified. Thus the visual arrangements in Figures 2 and 3 are demeaning and disempowering representations of these borrowers.

The next narrative associated with the group in Figure 3 describes Denise, a prospective borrower seeking a loan.

MAHODO is a group of three persons who are friends living in the same district. The group's representative, Denise, is the one in the photo with her hand raised. She is 38 years old and has had little schooling. She is married to a merchant named Boniface. The couple have five children, not all in school, but all in their care. Denise lives with her husband and children. She

and her husband jointly ensure that household expenses are covered. To do so, she has been selling food (polenta served with fish sauce) and lagoon sand in her region for about twenty years. She gets her supplies from a market in Benin. With the goal of bolstering her business and satisfying customers demand, Denise joined with the other members of the group Mahodo to requesting a sixth loan from ALIDé. The previous loans were indeed paid back. (Mahodo Group, 2013)

Similar to Robert in Figure 2, Denise has children and she is seeking a loan to grow her business. She also has her hand raised. Though it may be convenient to identify a borrower by a raised hand, this is not the norm in photography; these individuals in front of the camera lens by default are being depicted as inferior, because they can be controlled. Lenders are thus provided an opportunity to gaze at the controlled bodies of Robert, Denise, and the other group members in Figures 2 and 3 who appear to willingly engage with the camera lens. These borrowers are huddled together, perhaps an attempt by the photographer to capture all members in the camera frame. Their hands hang loosely by their sides in submission to the photographer, with the exception of Robert and Denise who have their hands raised. Lidchi (1999) argued that “photography combines voyeurism and control, because visual images are taken by the powerful of the powerless; the subjects of the photograph are transformed into objects by virtue of being shot” (p. 90). Subjects represented in Figures 2 and 3 thus are framed as not only bodies of knowledge but also “fetishistic objects, docile and visible bodies” (Lidchi, 1999, p. 90). Africans, according to Lidchi, were photographed when they were most susceptible or in need as Figures 2 and 3 connote.

Figures 4 and 5 also present an interesting paradox given the fact that these are representations of single borrowers and not groups. Yet their hands are raised in these images. Though users and prospective lenders will clearly know who is being described in Figures 4 and 5, Antoine (see Figure 4) and Sonagon (see Figure 5) represented in these images also have their hands raised. This is not just confusing, but also undignified depictions of these men. These images resurrect old Victorian narratives that suggest that Africans are helpless, subservient, and like children, they can be controlled.



Figure 4: Antoine's raised hand. Retrieved July 1, 2013 from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/578061>.



Figure 5: Sonagon's raised hand.. Retrieved July 1, 2013 from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/578055>

Figure 6 shows borrower Araba, described as not having formal education yet who has managed to establish a thriving business.



Figure 6: Araba smoking fish. Retrieved July 1st, 2013 from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/576497>

Araba is grilling fresh fish and she seems somewhat content with her business. The fish smoking in the background connote productivity and communicate to prospective lenders the industry of this woman. This image presents a post-colonial counter discourse where the African is portrayed as involved in her own empowerment. Like Abena Tawiah in Figure 1 who is fully engaged at her workplace, Araba also seems to be engaged in her own empowerment. Juxtaposing the images of Araba and Abena to the groups in Figures 2 and 3, the borrowers in Figures 2 and 3 seem to be waiting for the Western lender to hand them money.

Figure 7 shows Cecelia submitting to the Camera lens; she however, does not make eye contact, her eyes were captured shut. Figure 7 is without context. Western Lenders are thus forced to direct their gaze to the features of this woman. Her body is thus displayed for Western lenders to digitally scrutinize and consume. Her eyes are shut and viewers are not able to fully visually connect with this borrower. However, with just a click of a mouse,

lenders are able to send money to Cecelia. Kiva lender Jennifer in Figure 8 below explains why she lends to the poor like Cecelia.



Figure 7. Cecelia with eyes closed. Retrieved July 1, 2013 from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/575748>

Figure 8 shows Jennifer from New Jersey in the United States holding up a wine glass in a contemplative mood. She seems to be living a comfortable life and from her narrative, we learn that though her contribution may be small she feels she is really making a difference in the lives of the poor globally; she is impacting positive social change.



Figure 8. Kiva lender Jennifer holds up a wine glass:
Retrieved July 1, 2013 from
<http://www.kiva.org/lender/jennifer7900>

If my small loan helps someone realize their goals and dreams quicker, I am more than happy to help. My offering may be small and might seem like a drop in the bucket, but even loose change eventually adds up in the bottom of your purse! (Kiva Lender Jennifer, 2013)

Juxtaposing Jennifer's image to Cecelia's in Figure 7, one can discern the stark representational differences. Individuals like Jennifer are cultivating the new form of identity that Best, (2005); Huesca, (2001); Stengrim, (2005) and others theorized about.

This new form of identity formation is a strand of transnational identity that radiates goodwill, understanding, and a passion for helping the poorest of the poor in disadvantaged communities around the world. Through these new financial networks and social movements, lenders like Jennifer are able to remotely help others in developing countries. The process of virtually transferring money to another country to be used by a prospective borrower has replaced being physically present while helping someone. The Internet has brought some of us closer through the various networks that also serve as hubs of information (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Socialcam, Vine) that allow us to engage through building of relationships with people locally and globally. The World Wide Web enhances the connections that philanthropists like Jennifer initiate. Lenders like Jennifer are able to read the profiles of prospective borrowers and instantly lend to them. The instantaneous transfer of money through the finanscapes has been theorized as seamless processes (Appadurai, 1990).

Conclusion

By teasing out the communication processes, visual cues, and image arrangements, which are products of representation, this essay demonstrates the need for a theory of global communication processes through online microfinance. Though there is considerable research on global communication, this study contributes to communication theory by unpacking tensions of representation and empowerment through online microfinance. Web 2.0 digital technologies and its complex tools make it possible for borrowers living in developing countries to receive loans. These processes of lending are uneven; they are processes that dither between multiscales before reaching their final destinations. This paper

argues that though the communication process of transferring money to borrowers may appear to be seamless, the discursive process in documenting and representing the *other* is riddled with multifaceted issues. Online lending through web 2.0 technologies has added a new dimension to global lending, providing people who otherwise would not have had access to loan products with the support needed to improve their lives. Organizations like the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh have paved the way for social change and empowerment of the poor through microfinance. Technology has complicated and introduced new challenges to global lending. Communication scholars need to continue to explore new ways in theorizing global processes such as the flow of money, communication, and images in cyberspace. There is no doubt that organizations like Kiva are well meaning and strive to bring economic relief to the poor. However, the discursive practices of empowering the poor are riddled with issues of representation that may not be apparent to these organizations. Borrowers such as Abena and Araba seem to experience change in their lives through online microfinance; however, many like them do not have direct access to the global communication tools used to represent them. This paper critically examined Kiva's website through the lens of transnational and globalization theories. It explored the communication processes of microfinance through web 2.0 media technologies. The implicit and explicit choices made by Kiva in the representation of borrowers impact how audiences frame these borrowers, highlighting the limitations and paradoxes of empowering the poor through digital technologies. Some of the representations of borrowers on kiva.org are not only disempowering, but also create unintentional subliminal assertions of superiority of the Global North over the Global South.

Aknowledgement

The author would like to thank Dr. Radhika Gajjala & Dr. Ewart Skinner, both of Bowling Green State University, Ohio, for their valuable feedback during the development of the paper. He also conveys his gratitude to the reviewers of C&SC and faculty of the 2011 National Communication Association (NCA) Doctoral Honors seminar for their comments and feedback.

References

- Abe, K. (2009). The myth of media interactivity: Technology, communications and surveillance in Japan. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26, 73-88. doi: [10.1177/0263276409103119](https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409103119)

- Aboagye, Q. Q. A. (2009). A baseline study of Ghanaian microfinance institutions. *Journal of African Business*, 10, 163-181.
- Allison, A. (2009). The cool brand, affective activism and Japanese Youth. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26, 89-111. doi: 10.1177/0263276409103118
- Antoine. Retrieved July 1, 2013, from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/578061>
- Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7 (2), 295-310. doi: 10.1177/026327690007002017
- Araba. Retrieved July 1, 2013, from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/576497>
- Asante, K. M. (2006). The rhetoric of globalization: The Europeanisation of human ideas. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 1(2), 152-148. doi: 10.2167/md054.0
- Atkinson, D. J. (2008). Towards a model of interactivity in alternative media: A multilevel analysis of audiences and producers in a new social movement network. *Mass Communication & Society*, 11(3), 227-247. doi:10.1080/15205430801919705
- Bell, V. (2007). The potential of an ‘unfolding constellation’: Imagining Fraser’s transnational public sphere. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24 (4) 1-5. doi: 10.1177/0263276407083018
- Best, K. (2005). Rethinking the globalization movement: Toward a cultural theory of contemporary democracy and communication. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 2, 214-237.
- Berenbach, S., & Guzman, D. (1994). The solidarity group experience worldwide. In Maria, O., & Elisabeth, R. (Eds.), *The new world of microenterprise finance* (pp. 119-139). Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Bob, C. (2005) *The marketing of rebellion: Insurgents, media and international activism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Buckley, G. (1997). Microfinance in Africa: Is it either the problem or the solution? *World Development*, 25, 1081-1093.
- Cecelia. Retrieved July 1, 2013 from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/575748>
- Cetina, K. K., & Preda, A. (2007). The temporalization of financial markets: From network to flow. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24, 116-138. doi: 10.1177/0263276407084700
- Conway, J., & Singh, J. (2009). Is the world social forum a transnational public sphere?: Nancy Fraser, critical theory and the containment

of radical possibility. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(5) 61-84.

doi: 10.1177/0263276409106350

- Dempsey, E. S. (2009). NGOs, communicative labor, and the work of grassroots representation. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6(4), 328-345. doi:10.1080/14791420903348625
- Fork-Kintz, L. J. (2007). "Revisiting media theory in the era of transnational media corporations." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the NCA 93rd annual convention, TBA, Chicago, IL. Retrieved March 31 from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p192261_index.html
- Gajjala, R., Birzescu, A. and Yartey, F. (2011). Marketing Empowerment? Commodifying the "Other" through Online Microfinance. In Chopra R. & Gajjala R., (Eds.) *Global media, cultures, and identities* (pp. 217-230). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gajjala, R. & Birzescu, A. (2010). Voicing and placement in online networks. In M. Levina, and G. Kien (Eds.) *Post-global network and everyday life* (pp. 73-92). New York: Peter Lang.
- Gallardo, J., Ouattara, K., Randhawa, B., & Steel, F. W. (2005). Comparative review of microfinance regulatory framework issues in Benin, Ghana, and Tanzania. Retrieved January 14th 2010 from: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=743924
- Ha, L. (2007). The United States: The largest broadband market in the world. In L. S. Ha & R. J. Ganahl III, *Webcasting worldwide: Business models of an emerging global medium* (pp. 49-68). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Holcombe, H. S., Speth, G. J. (1995). Managing to empower: The Grameen bank's experience of poverty alleviation. London, Zed Books.
- Huesca, R. (2001). Conceptual contributions of new social movements to development communication research. *Communication Theory*, 11(4), 415-433. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2885.2001.tb00251.x
- Hudon, M. (2008). Norms and values of the various microfinance institutions. *International Journal of Social Economics*, 35, 35-48. doi:10.1108/03068290810843828
- Hulme, D. (2000). Impact assessment methodologies for microfinance: Theory, experience and better practice. *World Development*, 28(1), 79-98.
- Humphreys, S. (2009). *The economies within an online social network market. A case study of Ravelry*. In ANZCA 09 annual conference: Communication creativity and global citizenship, 8-10 July 2009, QUT Brisbane.

- Ito, S. (2003). Microfinance and social capital: Does social capital help create good practice? *Development in Practice*, 13(4), 322-332.
- Keating, C., Rasmussen, C., & Rishi, P. (2010). The rationality of empowerment: Microcredit, accumulation by dispossession, and the gendered economy. *Feminists Theorize International Political Economy Special Issue*, 36 (1), 153-176.
- Kittler, F. (2009). Towards an ontology of media. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26, 23-31.
- Kiva (2010). Abena Tawiah. Retrieved March 29 from http://www.kiva.org/lend/189441?_tpos=19&_tpg=2
- Kiva Lender Jenifer (2013). Retrieved July 4, 2013 from <http://www.kiva.org/lender/jennifer7900>
- Kiva. Org. KSF. Retrieved August 1, 2011 from http://www.kiva.org/partners/19?_redirect=true&page=about&action=aboutPartner&id=19
- Kotir, H. J., Obeng-Odoom, F. (2009). Microfinance and rural household development: A Ghanaian perspective. *Journal of Developing Societies*, 25(1), 85-105. doi: 10.1177/0169796X0902500104
- Lidchi, H. (1999) Finding the right image: British development NGOs and the regulation of imagery. In: T Skelton and T Allen (Eds.) *Culture and Global Change* (pp. 87–101). London: Routledge.
- Mahodo Group, (2013). Retrieved July 1, 2013 from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/575876>
- Mayoux, L. (2001). Tackling the Down side: Social capital, women’s empowerment and micro-finance in Cameroon. *Development and Change*, 32(3), 421-450. doi: 10.1111/1467-7660.00212
- Mirzoeff, N. (2009). *An introduction to visual culture*. New York, Routledge.
- Mmassa Group. (2013). Retrieved July 1, 2013 from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/573942>
- Moodie, M. (2013). Microfinance and the Gender of Risk: The Case of Kiva.org. *Signs*, 38(2), 279-302. doi:10.1086/667448
- Mosley, P., & Hulme, D. (1998). Microenterprise finance: Is there a conflict between growth and poverty alleviation? *World Development*, 26(5), 784-790.
- Muir, D. (2008). The pinball and the machine: Global cultural homogeneity and the commodity form. *Theory in Action*, 1(3), 53-68. doi:10.3798/tia.1937-0237.08013
- Nakamura, L. (2002). *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.

- Nakamura, L. (2008). *Digitizing Race: Visual cultures of the internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nakamura, L. (2009). Don't hate the player, hate the game: The racialization of labor in world of warcraft. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26 (2), 128-144. doi:10.1080/15295030902860252
- Nadesan, H. M. (2010). Enterprising narratives and the global financialization of microlending. *Women & Language*, 33(2), 9-30.
- Nash, K. (2007). Transnationalizing the public sphere: Critique and critical possibilities. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24(4), 53-57. doi: 10.1177/0263276407080093
- Nieto, G. B. (2005). Private funding of microcredit schemes: Much ado about nothing? *Development in Practice*, 15, 490-501. doi:10.1080/09614520500076027
- Ohanyan, A. (2007). Transnational NGO-Donor networks and the politics of sovereignty: The case of the microfinance sector in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. Paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Convention, Chicago.
- Owens, L., Palmer, K. L. (2003). Making the news: Anarchist counter-public relations on the World Wide Web. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 20(4), 335-361. doi:10.1080/0739318032000142007
- Park, A., Ren, C. (2001). Microfinance with Chinese characteristics. *World Development*, 29(1), 39-62. doi:10.1016/S0305-750X(00)00087-5
- Pickard, W. V. (2006). Assessing the radical democracy of indymedia: Discursive, technical, and institutional constructions. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(1), 19-38. doi:10.1080/07393180600570691
- Parameswaran, R. (2008). The other sides of globalization. *Communication, Culture, and Postcolonial Critique*, 1, 116-125. doi:10.1111/j.1753-9137.2007.00012.x
- Roy, M. A., & Wheeler, D. (2006). A survey of micro-enterprise in urban West Africa: drivers shaping the sector. *Development in Practice*, 16(5), 452-464. doi: 10.1080/09614520600792432
- Rozas, D. (2009). Throwing in the towel: Lessons from MFI liquidations. Retrieved December 15, 2009 from: http://www.microfinancegateway.org/gm/document-1.9.38716/Throwing%20in%20the%20Towel_%20%20Lessons%20from%20MFI%20Liquidations.pdf

- Sharma, A. (2008). *Logics of empowerment: Development, gender, and governance in neoliberal India*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Sonagon. Retrieved July 1, 2013, from <http://www.kiva.org/lend/578055>
- Sooknanan, P., Melkote, R. S., Skinner, E. C. (2002). Diffusion of an educational innovation in Trinidad and Tobago: The role of teacher attitudes and perceptions toward computers in the classroom. *The International Journal for Communication Studies*, 64(6), 557-571. doi: 10.1177/17480485020640060301
- Srinivas, H. Donor guidelines for microfinance international best practice. Retrieved March 17, 2011, from <http://www.gdrc.org/icm/inspire/donor-guidelines.html>
- Steel, W.F., Randhawa, B., Ouattara, K., & Gallardo, J. (2005). *Comparative Review Of Microfinance Regulatory Framework Issues In Benin, Ghana, And Tanzania*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
- Stengrim, A. L. (2005). Negotiating postmodern democracy, political activism, and knowledge production: Indymedia's grassroots and e-savvy answer to media oligopoly. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 2(4), 281-304. doi:10.1080/14791420500332527
- Williams, S. (2006). Ghana Susu collectors connect with formal banking. *New Africa*, 74.
- Yancey, C. (2012). Question about borrower profiles. Retrieved January 19, 2012, from <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/build-kiva>

Franklin Nii Amankwah Yartey is assistant professor. University of Dubuque, Iowa. United States of America.

Contact Address: University of Dubuque. 2000 University Avenue. Dubuque, IA 52001. United States of America. Email: fyartey@dbq.edu