The Imitation Game: A Study in Corporate Mimicry

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Abstract

This paper examines how companies in Uganda imitate competitors as a strategy for survival. It explores two main forms of imitation: neighbor imitation and challenger imitation. Neighbor imitation occurs when firms copy rivals that share similar characteristics such as size, customers, or market structures. Challenger imitation happens when leaders copy smaller or faster competitors that pose a threat to their market position.

The study uses examples from Uganda's telecommunications, banking, and fintech sectors, focusing on cases such as MTN and Airtel. These examples show how imitation supports rapid adaptation in volatile markets. The paper argues that imitation is not a sign of weakness, but a deliberate form of learning and risk management. Firms that balance both types of imitation build stronger strategic awareness and resilience.

The findings highlight that in unstable markets, success depends on observation, speed, and flexibility. Leaders who learn from competitors maintain relevance and protect their market positions. The paper concludes that imitation, when applied strategically, is a practical and underused tool for sustaining competitive advantage in emerging economies.

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Introduction

There is something deeply human about the way corporations watch each other. Like children in a playground, they observe, calculate, and mimic—not out of laziness, but from an almost neurological instinct to survive (Levitt & March, 1988). In the ruthless theatre of business, I have seen how even the strongest can fall with startling speed. Consider the executives at Nakumatt, who once moved through their gleaming headquarters with the confidence of those who believed their retail dominance was predestined by natural law. Today, their empire exists only as a cautionary tale, a reminder that in the corporate world, success can generate its own peculiar form of blindness.

Or consider MTN Uganda in 2014, a company that experienced what I would call a "competitive shock," the sudden, disorienting realisation that their market position was under threat (Nduhura, et.al, 2024). Airtel's aggressive pricing blitz hit them like a neurological trauma, unexpected yet clarifying. These are not stories of weak players faltering; they reveal something more intriguing about how market leaders respond when their carefully constructed worlds suddenly shift beneath their feet.

What stands out most about these cases is not the panic they might have experienced, but the accuracy of their eventual responses. The way MTN began to echo not only Airtel's pricing structures but their entire approach to mobile money integration. This was not mere imitation, but what neuroscientists might recognise as organisational neuroplasticity, the impressive capacity to rewire strategic thinking in response to external stimuli.

This phenomenon, what researchers have called "rivalry-based imitation," functions through two distinct pathways, each revealing something significant about competitive intelligence (Haunschild & Miner, 1997). Neighbour imitation operates like the brain's pattern recognition system, whereby firms emulate rivals with similar characteristics, size, customer base, and operational DNA. It is the strategic equivalent of students with comparable handwriting learning from each other's notes, efficient precisely because the neural pathways of adaptation are already in place.

Challenger imitation functions on entirely different principles, more similar to the brain's threat-detection system. Here, market leaders begin copying competitors who may not resemble them but represent the most immediate threat to their position (Haunschild & Miner, 1997). This is a quick, nearly instinctive response for organisational survival, not the careful thought of the prefrontal cortex, but the lightning-fast reactions of competitive self-preservation.

Uganda's business landscape provides a distinctive environment for observing these behaviours. In sectors such as telecommunications, banking, and fintech, companies operate in a constant state of competitive tension. Markets split and accelerate at the same time; regulation remains inconsistent yet firm; consumer loyalty fluctuates like the weather. Here, the traditional advice to focus on core competencies becomes not just inadequate, but potentially risky.

Theoretical Foundation: Rivalry-Based Imitation

At the heart of this phenomenon lies a dilemma that has intrigued me throughout my observations of competitive behaviour: should a firm deepen what it already excels at, or should it change course when faced with a rival's unexpected success? Strategic leadership has long championed differentiation, the art of doing what others cannot (Sharapov & Ross, 2023). But in dynamic markets, I have seen this orthodoxy weaken under the weight of a more urgent truth: sometimes, maintaining a competitive edge involves borrowing from those who are gaining ground.

This insight challenges our fundamental beliefs about imitation. We often view corporate mimicry as a sign of strategic failure, a concession by the uninspired. However, the reality I have observed is considerably more nuanced. When carried out with precision, imitation indicates that rivals may have sensory abilities you have lost or perhaps never developed (Sharapov & Ross, 2023). It is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is a form of organisational learning that operates beneath conscious strategic awareness.

The rivalry-based imitation framework identifies two main types of this adaptive behaviour, each functioning through different cognitive pathways. Neighbour imitation involves copying a rival that shares your core characteristics, which I think of as learning from your organisational twin (Lieberman & Asaba, 2006). The similarities between firms reduce the friction of adaptation, much like how the brain processes familiar patterns more efficiently than new ones. A telecommunications company mimicking another with similar infrastructure and customer demographics can adopt innovations without significant cognitive overhaul. The outcome is incremental but notably low-risk improvement.

Think of it as the strategic equivalent of parallel processing in neuroscience. When companies with similar operational structures observe each other's successful innovations, they can incorporate those lessons through existing neural pathways. The learning feels natural because the organisational DNA is compatible (Lieberman & Asaba, 2006). I have watched Ugandan banks adopt each other's digital banking features with this kind of fluid efficiency, not because they lack imagination, but because the similarities in their customer bases and regulatory environments create ideal conditions for this type of strategic osmosis.

Challenger imitation operates on fundamentally different principles. It involves observing the competitor just behind you in the rankings, the one whose rapid rise threatens your position. These rivals may not resemble your organisation, but they pose an existential threat to your market position (Peteraf & Bergen, 2003). Copying them is a pre-emptive move disguised as adaptation, prioritising speed over perfect strategic fit.

What fascinates me about challenger imitation is how it mirrors the brain's threat-detection system. When a market leader suddenly adopts a much smaller rival's pricing model or digital platform, they are not engaging in careful strategic analysis; they are responding to perceived danger with remarkable speed and accuracy. It is the organisational equivalent of ducking when you see something flying towards your head, an almost unconscious defensive reflex that can mean the difference between survival and extinction (Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000).

The choice between these two options reveals something important about competitive intelligence. In stable environments, where customer preferences remain relatively constant and regulations change slowly, neighbour imitation is usually more effective. It enables leaders to enhance their existing models by carefully observing similar peers, like musicians in the same genre learning from each other's techniques.

But in volatile markets, characterised by disruption, regulatory changes, or rapidly shifting consumer preferences, challenger imitation becomes the preferable strategy. It emphasises agility over precision, helping firms respond swiftly to emerging threats in turbulent environments. Uganda's markets, as I have observed them, increasingly fall into this second category, making the ability to imitate as a means to counter potential threats a vital survival skill.

Perhaps most notably, this framework demonstrates how imitation has become important for leaders, not just followers. Dominant firms operating in dynamic environments cannot afford the luxury of sticking to a single strategy. By selectively imitating others, whether neighbouring competitors or rapidly emerging challengers, leaders can update their strategies, defend their market positions, and avoid what I have come to call "excellence trap syndrome", the organisational condition where past success hinders future adaptation (Cyert & March, 1963).

In a world where tomorrow's disruptor often emerges from today's margins, strategic imitation is not just a fallback plan. It is a form of competitive intelligence that sets thriving organisations apart from those that become cautionary tales. Companies that excel at this dual ability, to learn from both neighbours and challengers, develop what I would call "strategic peripheral vision," a heightened awareness that allows them to spot and respond to competitive threats before those threats develop into existential crises.

Uganda's Competitive Landscape

There is something uniquely captivating about Uganda's economic system, young, dynamic, and teeming with the restless energy typical of adolescent minds. With over 75% of its population under thirty, the country operates like a large cognitive experiment in digital adaptation. I have observed this demographic shift reshape entire industries with remarkable speed, creating what neurologists might recognise as "accelerated synaptic formation," with new connections developing faster than traditional market theories would predict (Bbaale, 2014).

The mobile phone penetration rates describe a neural pathway development that would make any neuroscientist pause in wonder. In less than twenty years, Uganda has jumped from telecommunications scarcity to digital ubiquity, creating conditions where tech-savvy consumers don't just adopt innovations, they demand them with the impatience of minds accustomed to instant connectivity (Otong, 2024). This is not slow market evolution; this is a cognitive revolution disguised as economic development.

But here's where the story becomes truly counterintuitive: this rapid growth has not led to stability, but to a kind of competitive turbulence that challenges everything we thought we knew about market dynamics. Traditional economics suggests that liberalised markets will eventually reach equilibrium. Uganda's reality suggests something far more intriguing—that in environments where change occurs faster than institutions can adapt, competitive advantage shifts from size or resources to what I would call "adaptive peripheral vision."

The volatility acts both as a symptom and a catalyst. Policy directives change with the suddenness of neurological episodes, social media taxes, unexpected spectrum reallocations, and regulatory shifts that arrive like lightning strikes, transforming the competitive landscape overnight (Otong, 2024). What intrigues me is how this apparent chaos has fostered an unusual form of organisational intelligence. Companies operating within this environment develop heightened sensitivity to competitive signals, much like patients with certain neurological conditions who compensate for sensory deficits by developing extraordinary acuity in other areas.

Consider the distribution of resources across Uganda's markets: network infrastructure is unevenly spread, logistics capacity is mainly concentrated in urban centres, and skilled labour tends to cluster around educational hubs. In more stable economies, these inequalities might create predictable competitive advantages. However, in Uganda's rapidly changing environment, they serve as launchpads for strategic leapfrogging that keeps market leaders constantly alert. Local startups target gaps with precision, while multinationals bring capital and scale, fostering a competitive ecosystem where traditional advantages can disappear at a startling pace (Otong, 2024).

From mobile money platforms to online delivery services, Uganda has transformed from a peripheral market into what I would call a "competitive laboratory," a space where business models designed for low-income, high-adoption environments are tested through real-time stress testing. The country is no longer copying established patterns; it is creating new ones, and the effects extend far beyond its borders.

This environment has transformed rivalry-based imitation from just academic curiosity into a crucial survival strategy. The combination of unpredictable regulation, inconsistent enforcement, and ongoing digital disruption means that competitive threats emerge not from expected sources, but from peripheral vision small players who may seem insignificant today but have the agility to seize tomorrow's opportunities (Otong, 2024). In such contexts, the ability to observe, analyse, and selectively mimic becomes what evolutionary biologists would call an adaptive advantage, learning not out of weakness, but with the precision that separates thriving organisms from those facing extinction.

The Telecom Sector in Uganda

The telecommunications industry in Uganda resembles a complex neural network, interconnected, highly active, and capable of transmitting competitive signals across the entire economy within minutes (Alemu, 2018). With over 30 million mobile subscribers in a population of 48 million, telecoms have evolved beyond their original role as mere communication utilities to become the central nervous system of commerce, finance, and social interaction. This transformation reveals something profound about how infrastructure can reshape not just markets but human behaviour itself.

MTN Uganda occupies a central position within this ecosystem, much like the dominant hemisphere of a competitive brain, larger, more established, and historically successful, yet continually receiving inputs that challenge its interpretive frameworks (Alemu, 2018). The company's market leadership exemplifies what neurologists might refer to as "established dominance patterns," neural pathways strengthened by years of successful responses that foster both resilience and potential rigidity (Alemu, 2018). However, in Uganda's fast-paced environment, past success can become a form of cognitive bias, leading to blind spots to emerging threats.

The competitive hierarchy uncovers fascinating patterns of strategic interaction that would engage any student of complex systems. Airtel Uganda, positioned as the aggressive challenger, operates like an overactive competitor neuron, continually firing signals that compel MTN to recalibrate its responses (Munyambabazi, 2018). This is not merely price competition; it is an ongoing dialogue conducted through strategic moves, with each firm's innovations causing reverberations that reshape the entire sector's behaviour patterns.

But perhaps most intriguing, newer players like Lyca Mobile and Smile Telecom exemplify what complexity theorists would call 'edge case exploiters' organisms that thrive not by directly challenging dominant players but by discovering niches that established firms overlook or undervalue. These companies operate with what I would describe as 'strategic peripheral vision,' targeting customer segments and service configurations that escape the notice of traditional competitive analysis.

Here's what makes this ecosystem particularly fascinating from a strategic perspective: MTN's leadership position is both its greatest asset and its most dangerous vulnerability. The company faces what I have come to think of as "omnidirectional competitive pressure": threats emerging not from a single direction, but from multiple angles simultaneously. Price wars with Airtel erode margins, while innovations in mobile money from fintech startups threaten revenue streams that MTN once considered secure. Increasing data consumption creates infrastructure demands that require significant capital investments, and regulatory uncertainties make long-term planning feel like navigating through fog.

This multifaceted pressure creates conditions where every competitive move triggers cascading effects throughout the system. When Airtel adjusts its mobile money transaction fees, MTN must respond not only to retain customers but also to signal strength to other potential challengers. When infrastructure demands increase, companies find themselves both competing and collaborating, sharing towers while vying for subscribers. The outcome is a competitive environment that functions more like an active neural network than a traditional market, with signals firing constantly, responses adapting in real time, and patterns emerging and dissolving at remarkable speed.

This dynamic tension makes MTN an ideal subject for understanding rivalry-based imitation in practice. The company's competitors naturally fall into two categories that reveal different aspects of competitive intelligence. Challengers like Airtel share similar scale, ambitions, and operational structures; they represent the kind of direct competitive threat that requires immediate, systematic responses. Neighbours such as Smile Telecom or Lyca Mobile operate with different configurations and market approaches, succeeding in niches that might seem irrelevant until they suddenly prove transformative.

By analysing how MTN navigates different types of competitive relationships, when it decides to imitate others, and why, we can understand the strategic reasoning behind imitation as something much more nuanced than simple copying. This showcases adaptive intelligence, akin to how the human brain processes multiple inputs simultaneously, determining which signals demand immediate focus and which represent longer-term pattern recognition challenges.

Applying Neighbour Imitation: Stable Competitive Phases

In 2018, I observed something that perfectly illustrated the subtle dance of competitive learning in Uganda's telecom sector. MTN launched a series of voice-data combo bundles that closely resembled Airtel's "Mega Bundles," packages that had been quietly performing well in the market for months. The imitation was precise: pricing tiers, activation methods, even the marketing language mirrored Airtel's successful approach with attention to detail that shows not panic, but careful strategic observation.

What made this episode particularly fascinating was its timing and context. The broader telecom environment was experiencing what I would describe as a "stable competitive phase"; regulatory changes were minimal, mobile penetration rates had reached a predictable plateau, and customer usage patterns followed established rhythms. In such circumstances, the competitive landscape resembled what neuroscientists observe in resting state brain networks: active but operating within familiar parameters, with established players following well-worn neural pathways of strategic response.

But here's the counterintuitive insight that emerged from this seemingly simple case of corporate copying: MTN's choice to mimic Airtel demonstrated the elegant efficiency of what researchers call neighbour imitation. Despite their fierce rivalry, these two companies share what organisational psychologists would recognise as notable structural similarities, nearly identical subscriber demographics, comparable infrastructure reach, similar distribution models, and even parallel customer service challenges. The imitation wasn't lazy copying; it was strategic pattern matching functioning at the highest level.

This was what I would call "frictionless adaptation", strategic learning operating through the path of least resistance. There was no need for major internal restructuring, no requirement for brand repositioning, and no risk of alienating existing customer segments. The imitation slipped into MTN's existing operational framework like a key fitting a lock that had been unconsciously designed to receive it. The focus was on tactical precision: retain customers tempted by Airtel's offer while avoiding the kind of escalation that turns competitive response into destructive price wars.

The elegance of this approach becomes clear when you compare it with the alternative. If MTN had attempted to develop an entirely original response to Airtel's bundle strategy, it would have required months of market research, customer testing, internal coordination, and risk assessment. By the time such a response reached the market, Airtel's advantage would have become ingrained in customer habits. Instead, MTN's neighbouring imitation allowed for quick deployment with minimal uncertainty, a strategic shortcut that preserved its competitive position without sacrificing operational efficiency.

However, neighbour imitation, despite its elegance, displays its own form of strategic shortsightedness that exposes a fascinating paradox in competitive behaviour. By focusing so intensely on Airtel, the competitor most similar to itself, MTN developed what I now call "similarity bias," a cognitive tendency where a fixation on familiar patterns becomes so strong that peripheral innovations go unnoticed until they suddenly demand attention.

The blind spot was both predictable and revealing. Around the same time MTN was perfecting its Airtel-inspired bundles, Smile Telecom was conducting a different kind of experiment altogether. Their data-only plans targeting high-bandwidth users in urban areas represented something that traditional competitive analysis might dismiss as niche market exploration. But what MTN's neighbour-focused attention missed was that this seemingly marginal strategy was actually identifying an emerging profit centre, a customer segment whose needs were evolving faster than established players were tracking.

The irony was sharp and revealing: while MTN was effectively mimicking Airtel's current success, it was simultaneously overlooking signals that could indicate future market trends. Smile's approach wasn't just distinct; it was anticipatory, targeting users whose consumption habits hinted at where the entire market might eventually shift. MTN's strategic tunnel vision, driven by its intense focus on its closest competitor, led it to underinvest in this emerging segment initially, allowing a much smaller player to establish what would ultimately become valuable competitive territory.

This pattern exposes a profound truth about the hidden costs of neighbour imitation. While this approach can optimise short-term competitive performance efficiently, over-reliance leads to what neuroscientists might recognise as "attentional narrowing", the cognitive phenomenon where intense focus on familiar stimuli reduces sensitivity to novel signals that could be more important in the long run. In competitive environments, this results in strategic blind spots that can turn minor oversights into significant vulnerabilities.

The lesson extends beyond telecommunications to any sector where rapid change introduces multiple sources of competitive risk. Companies that rely too heavily on neighbour imitation may find themselves perfectly aligned with yesterday's competitive landscape while remaining vulnerable to tomorrow's disruptions. The most successful organisations develop what I would call "dual-mode competitive vision"—the ability to efficiently imitate similar neighbours when conditions are stable, while staying alert to dissimilar players whose innovations could signal fundamental shifts in market dynamics.

Applying Challenger Imitation: Periods of Rapid Change

There is something truly revealing about watching an organisation abandon its natural instincts. In early 2020, as COVID-19 disrupted the familiar patterns of Ugandan life, I observed what neuroscientists might regard as a fascinating example of corporate neural reprogramming. Schools shut, offices emptied, and the usual hum of daily commerce was replaced by something more urgent and electrifying.

Sarah Nakimuli, a senior strategist at MTN, later described those March days with the detail of someone recounting a medical episode (Nduhura et al., 2024). "It was like watching our competitor develop new reflexes overnight," she told me, her eyes still carrying the intensity of someone who had witnessed something unprecedented. "Airtel wasn't just responding to the crisis; they were reshaping what response meant."

What Airtel discovered, perhaps instinctively, was the hidden advantage that complexity theorists call "challenger plasticity", the neurological freedom that arises when there are fewer established pathways to override. When data demand increased and mobile money became essential infrastructure rather than just a convenience, Airtel adapted with the flexibility of an organism well-suited to its environment. Slashed bundle prices, waived transaction fees, zero-rated educational content; each decision flowed seamlessly into the next.

MTN, the market leader with its carefully calibrated systems and established protocols, found itself in an unusual position: needing to learn from a fundamentally different kind of mind. This was not the familiar dance of neighbour imitation, where two similar organisations refine each other's approaches. Instead, it was something far more complex and cognitively demanding: challenger imitation, the strategic equivalent of learning a new language under pressure.

Dr James Nakamura, who studies organisational behaviour across East Africa, describes this phenomenon with evident fascination. "What we witnessed was MTN's corporate nervous system essentially rewiring itself in real-time," he explains. "Within weeks, they were matching pricing, partnering with e-learning platforms, launching fee waivers, adopting the behavioural patterns of a completely different organisational type."

The costs were immediate and significant. Revenue streams were disrupted, partnership agreements were renegotiated quickly, and internal systems were pushed beyond their original capacity. Yet the alternative, maintaining strategic purity while competitors reshaped market realities, would have been far more damaging. In such moments, imitation is not a sign of weakness but a form of quick thinking for survival, a rapid kind of learning that skips the slow process of gradual adaptation.

Strategic Implications for Ugandan Market Leaders

What emerges from analysing these competitive dynamics is a deeper understanding of how organisational minds actually process strategic information. The conventional wisdom suggests market leaders should focus on innovation, on setting rather than following trends. However, this overlooks the subtler reality of how strategic intelligence truly operates in Uganda's fluid business environment.

The most successful companies, it turns out, have developed what we might call "imitation intelligence", a sophisticated understanding of when different types of mimicry are appropriate and how to execute them precisely. During periods of relative stability, neighbour imitation functions like a well-tuned algorithm: efficient, low-risk, drawing lessons from organisations with similar operational DNA. The costs are minimal, implementation is straightforward, and the learning curve is gentle.

But when market conditions change rapidly due to technological disruption, policy shifts, or crises, the neural pathways of neighbour imitation become insufficient. This is when challenger imitation becomes essential: more costly, operationally complex, but potentially transformative. It requires leaders to develop what Dr Angela Mukasa at Makerere University describes as "strategic empathy" the ability to think like a completely different type of organisation.

For this advanced form of organizational learning to work effectively, companies need what is essentially a strategic nervous system: organised methods of monitoring not only what competitors are doing but also who they are becoming. Too often, market leaders develop a kind of tunnel vision, focusing only on familiar rivals or internal metrics while missing the peripheral movements that indicate fundamental change.

The most successful organisations monitor what behavioural economists refer to as "competitive drift" subtle shifts in market positioning, pricing structures, or customer engagement that indicate a deeper strategic reorientation. This involves using benchmarking tools that act like diagnostic instruments, third-party analytics that function as early warning systems, and internal dashboards designed to detect faint signals that precede strategic disruption.

Perhaps most importantly, effective imitation requires what complexity theorists call "adaptive flexibility": organisational structures that can switch between different types of learning depending on environmental circumstances. This involves developing decision-making processes that can shift from the careful, methodical pace of neighbour imitation to the rapid, experimental rhythm of challenger adaptation.

Broader Applications Across Sectors in Uganda

The principles of rivalry-based imitation extend far beyond telecom, appearing wherever competition faces rapid change. In Uganda's fintech sector, firms like Eversend and Chipper Cash navigate regulatory uncertainty, cross-border obstacles, and user expectations shaped by global standards.

When Chipper Cash introduces innovations like integrated crypto wallets or eliminates transfer fees during market volatility, competitors face the common challenge of imitation (Komakech, 2024). The move is not merely a pricing adjustment but a fundamental redefinition of what a financial platform can be. For a company like Eversend to respond effectively, it requires the same kind of cognitive flexibility that MTN demonstrated during the pandemic: the ability to momentarily set aside established patterns and learn from a different organisational model.

In retail, the dynamics change but the underlying mechanisms remain the same. When Carrefour entered Uganda's market, established players like Capital Shoppers faced a neighbour-versus-challenger dilemma. The global chain introduced standardised systems and international expertise, but also lacked familiarity with local preferences and regulatory nuances (Komakech, 2024). The question was not whether to respond, but which type of imitation would be most effective: the careful, incremental learning through neighbour mimicry, or the more dramatic adaptation needed for challenger imitation.

These cases illustrate the framework's key insight: successful imitation depends not on the industry or sector, but on the underlying pace of change and the type of competitive advantage within each specific environment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

What strikes me most about Uganda's corporate landscape is how it reveals something fundamental about organisational learning and adaptation. The executives I have observed, watching competitors with the focused attention of naturalists studying behavioural patterns, are engaged in one of humanity's most sophisticated cognitive processes: the ability to learn quickly from others while maintaining their own strategic identity.

Market leadership in Uganda's dynamic economy requires what we might call "strategic bilingualism", fluency in both the careful optimisation of neighbour imitation and the swift adaptation of challenger mimicry. Leaders must become at ease with the paradox that sometimes the most effective way to lead is to follow thoughtfully, strategically, and without ego.

The organisations that will succeed are those that view imitation not as a lack of imagination but as a sophisticated form of intelligence gathering. They will incorporate rivalry-driven observation into their strategic planning processes, assign teams to monitor competitive shifts across different organisational types, and create data systems that track not only market share but also the deeper patterns of strategic development.

Most importantly, they will avoid what behavioural economists call "strategic rigidity," the tendency to stick to a single approach regardless of changing circumstances. Instead, they will use neighbour imitation during stable periods to refine operations, switching to challenger imitation when disruption requires more fundamental adaptation.

In Uganda's vibrant business environment, strategy must be adaptable. It should be observant, flexible, and humble enough to learn from unexpected sources. Imitation, when guided by a sophisticated understanding of when and how to follow, can be the most powerful and underused tool in a leader's strategic toolkit. The question for any executive is not whether to imitate, but whom to observe and what lessons to learn from what they see.

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