

# Panya HCD Case Study

## Leapfrogging Traditional eCommerce in Africa



Project Duration  
**2016 - 2021**

My Role  
**Lead UX Designer & Co-Founder**

# Project Background

My journey began in Kampala, Uganda, where I had grown up. My team had a bold vision: to tap into Sub-Saharan Africa's \$100B e-commerce opportunity.

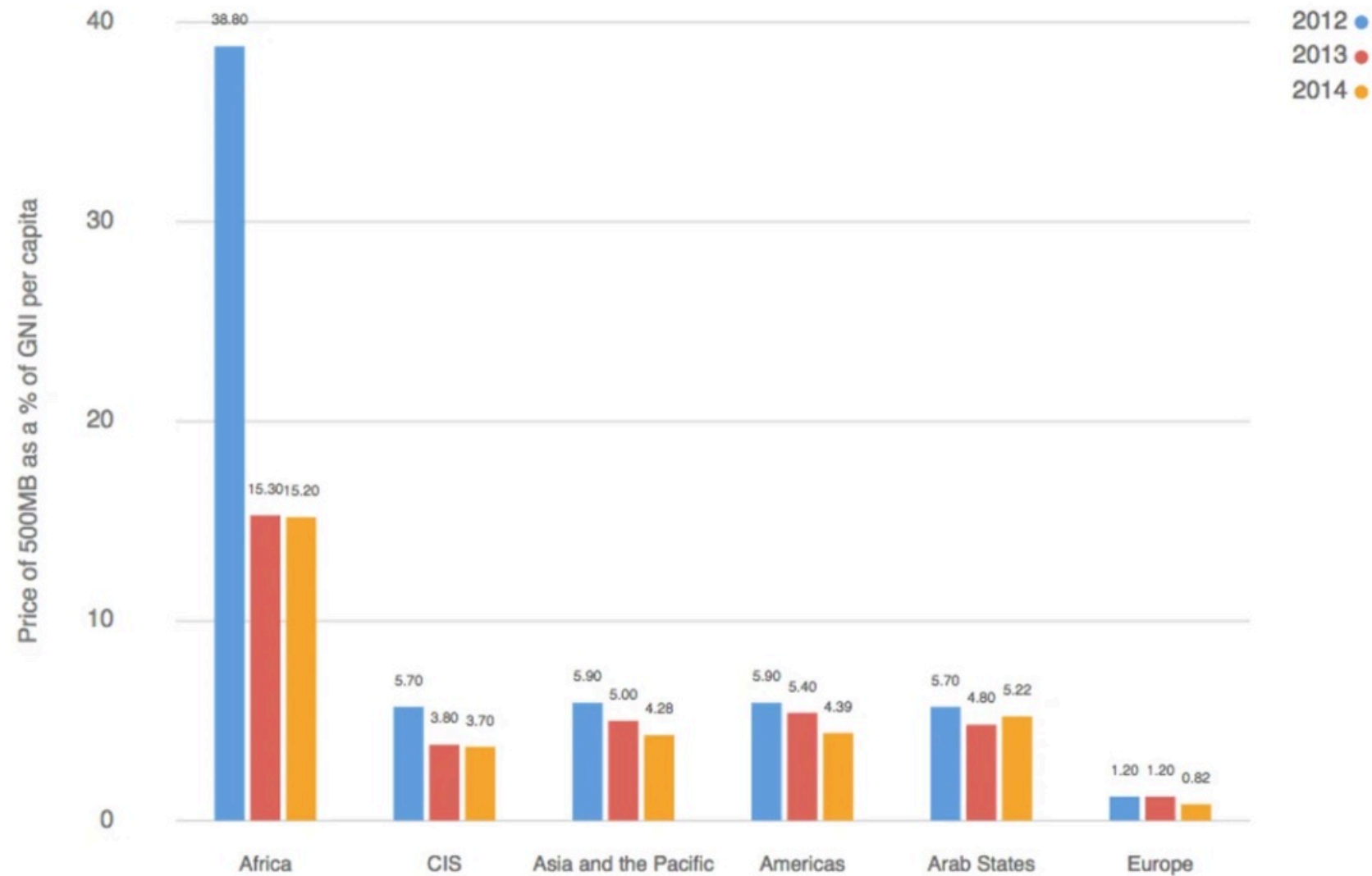
What I didn't expect was that this journey would lead to becoming Uganda's largest online shoe retailer in just five months - and then walk away from it all.



*Kampala's dynamic landscape: 4M+ population, 70% mobile penetration, yet largely untapped e-commerce potential - this contradiction drove our initial research questions*



# Market Context: Kampala, Uganda (c.2016)



Highest (relative) data costs globally

**THE CHEAPEST SOCIAL MBS IN UGANDA**

- 50MBS @ ONLY 200/-
- 200MBS @ ONLY 500/-
- 600MBS @ ONLY 2,000/-

Now with Instagram & Snapchat

Dial\*133\*6#

**africell**

\*terms and conditions apply

Heavily subsidised for 'Social Media only' data packages



**CNN** www.cnn.com

**Affordable Internet in Africa? Less talk, more action | CNN**

Everyone should have access to affordable Internet by 2020.

# Starting with Questions, Not Answers: The Reality Check

As the lead designer on our small but mighty team of five, I started with research. We had two hypotheses:

- 1) Small businesses are not online and don't care to be**
- 2) People desire to purchase online but either cannot find what they need or don't trust existing solutions**

\*Boy, were we wrong about that first one!

Research:

90+

Stakeholder  
interviews



20hr

Ethnographic  
Studies

We engaged 100s of  
carpenters, plumbers,  
traders, delivery men  
(aka Boda boda's), etc..



# Findings

Our first research insight: The 'confusion' of Kampala's shopping districts wasn't chaos - it was a complex, efficient system we needed to understand before we could improve it. Some challenges uncovered included:

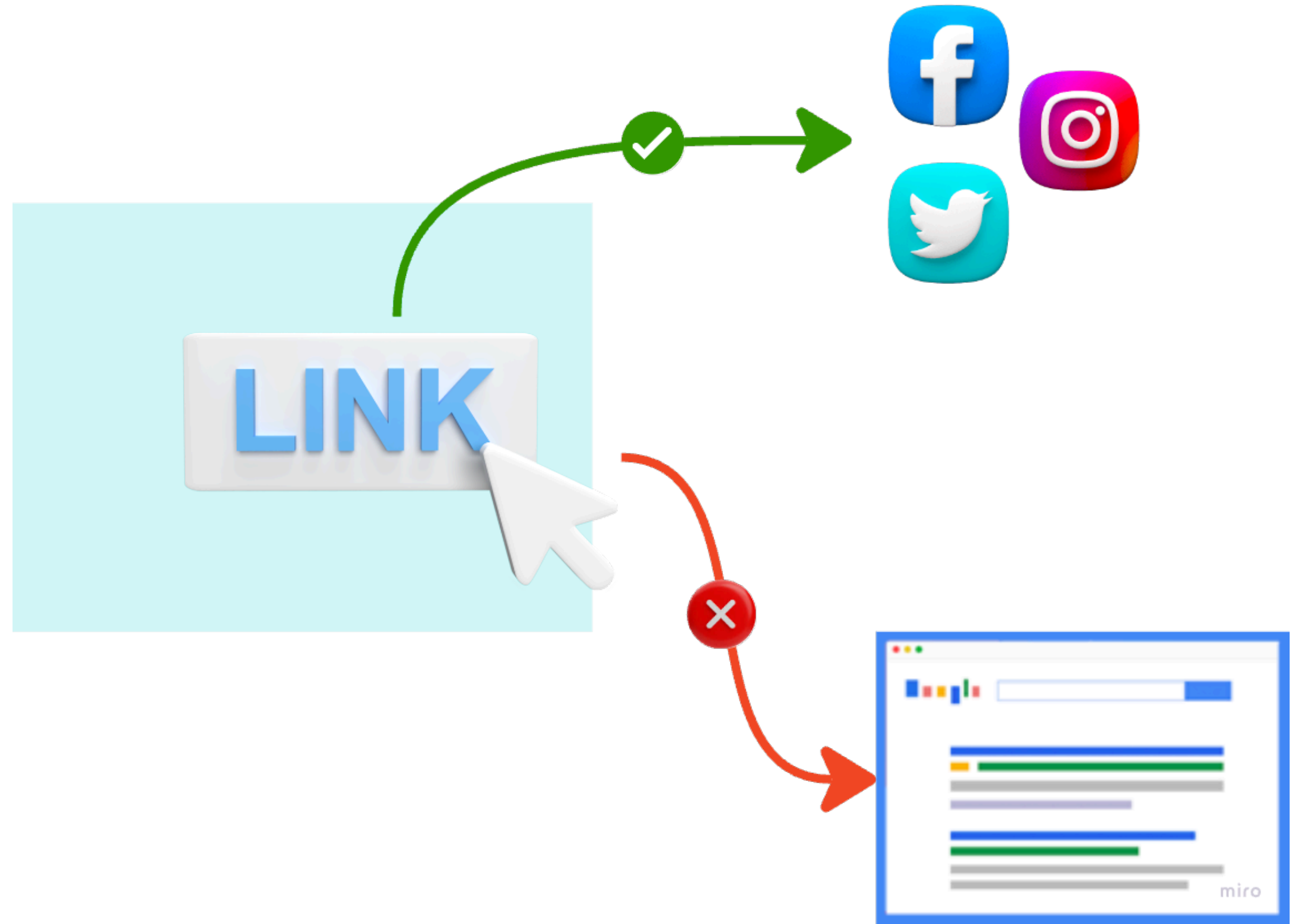
- Limited digital adoption
- Infrastructure gaps
- Trust barriers



*Shopping was confusing but intentional! No prices displayed, and highly complex ownership structure - each box represents a different owner within a single shared space!*

# Findings

A lot of the people we interviewed were spending lots of time on social media and often engaged with ads. That said, they rarely opened links that took them off a social media platform due to fear of higher data costs.



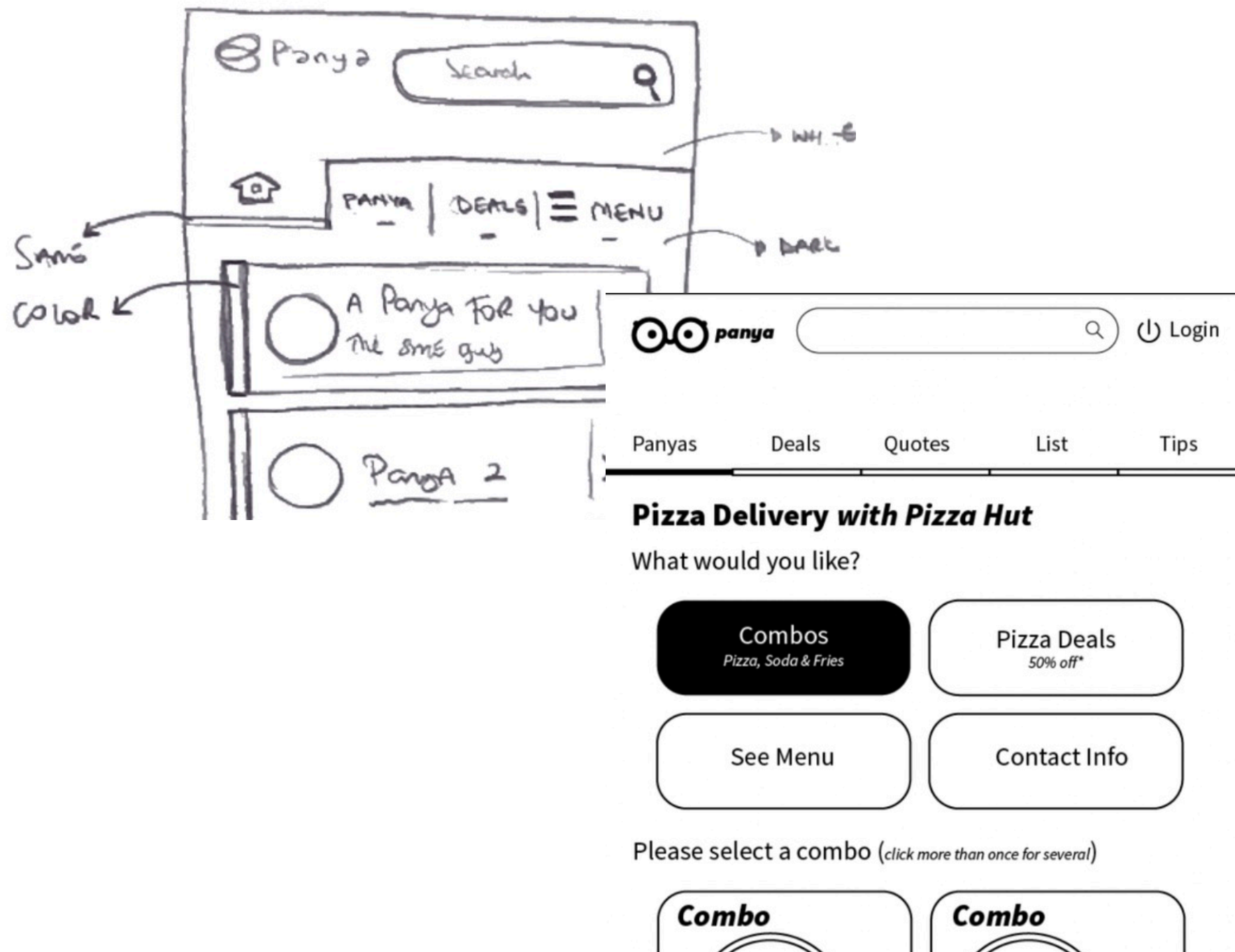
After synthesizing our research findings, we framed our core challenge as:

## **How Might We..**

enable small businesses to sell online in a way that:

- Works with existing behavior patterns and infrastructure
- Requires minimal technical knowledge
- Keeps data costs low
- Builds on existing trust networks
- Can scale across fragmented markets?

# Experiment 1



After our initial research, we first explored the most obvious solution - a dedicated shopping app. We created clickable prototypes that would make the shopping experience more structured and user-friendly.

Our commitment to user research saved us from a costly mistake. Through Facebook surveys, we discovered a crucial insight: **users in our market installed on average just one new app every 4-5 months. Even when installed, these apps rarely saw continued use.**

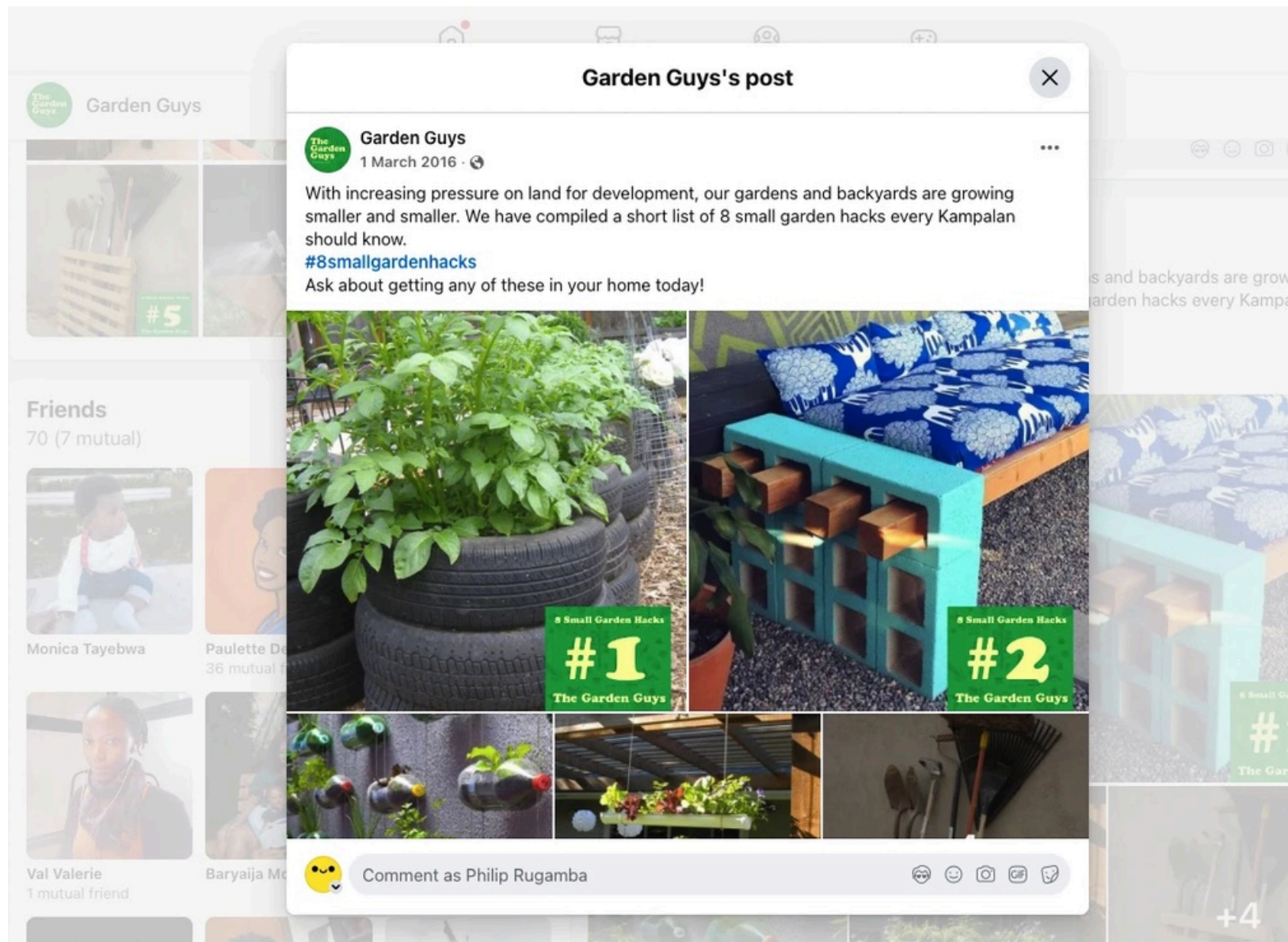
*Early app mockups exploring a dedicated shopping interface. While users liked the design, our subsequent research would prove this wasn't the right approach for our market.*

# Experiment 2

Our next attempt was almost comically simple: a fake Facebook brand called “Garden Guys” offering free yard improvement advice. The goal was to generate leads and manually forward them to a supplier list.

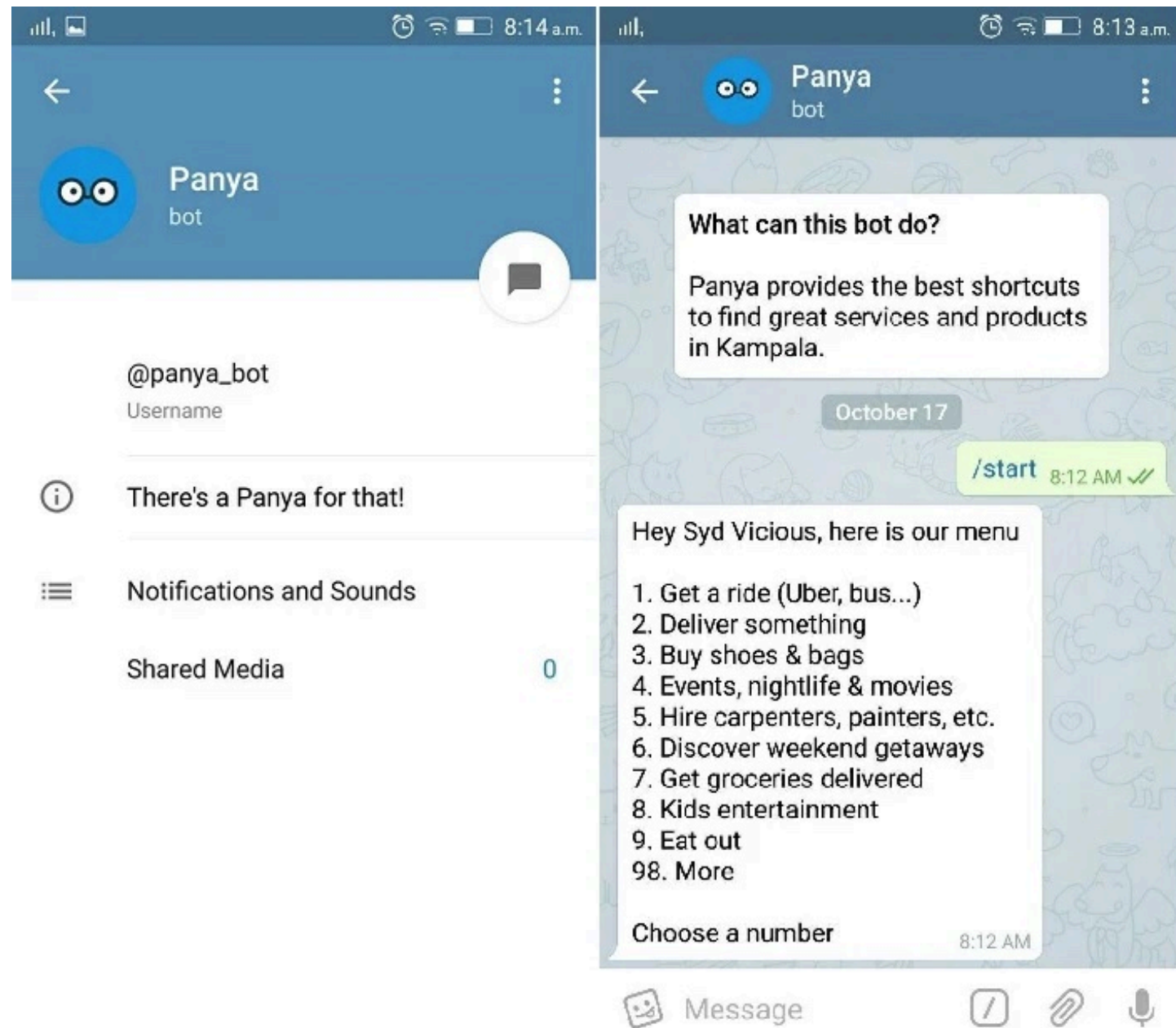
Looking back, it was a primitive test, but it taught us a crucial lesson about digital engagement in our market:

**Businesses could build trust and generate leads through content rather than traditional ecommerce listings, shaping our understanding of social media as a commerce platform.**



*Prototype #1: 'Garden Guys' Facebook experiment*

# Experiment 3



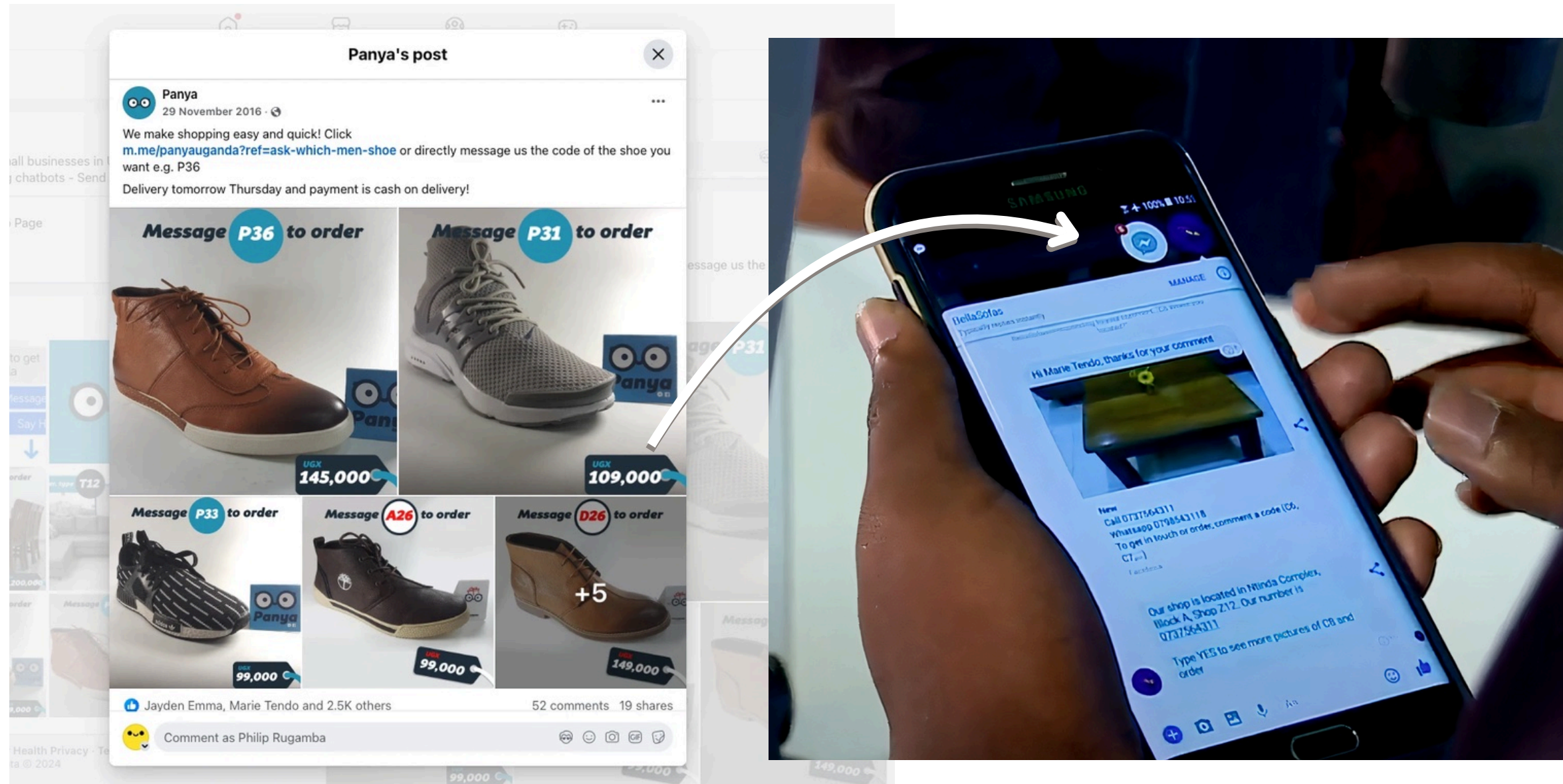
Prototype #2: Food ordering chatbot for our office building

Sometimes the best ideas come from the most unexpected places. For us, it was a cricket-score bot in a WhatsApp group. This tiny bot sparked what would become our breakthrough moment.

Our second experiment proved to be an early breakthrough moment. **Our Panya\* chatbot proved that users preferred familiar chat interfaces over traditional e-commerce. 200+ orders in one night validated our pivot towards chat-based commerce**

\* Panya means 'Shortcut' in the lingua franca

# Final Solution



Our final solution combined our findings from the experiments enabling us to create a checkout experience using chatbots that enabled users to complete their transactions all within Social media!

*Each shoe listing included a unique code for easy ordering via chat. This simple system solved the discovery-to-purchase friction we observed in our research*

# Impact: Becoming Uganda's Largest Online Shoe Retailer

**1000+**

shoes sold monthly for  
32 merchants

**24%**

month-over-month  
growth

**60%**

gross margin



*Our team grew from 5 (including 3 co-founders) to over 11 directly employed and a network of an additional 8 indirect contributors working with 32 shoe & bag merchants.*

# Plot Twist

## Two realizations changed our trajectory:

1. Social media restrictions during Uganda's political tensions showed the risk of building on platforms we couldn't control.
2. While successful as Uganda's largest online shoe retailer, we saw a bigger opportunity.

We could become the "Amazon of Uganda" - or empower thousands of other businesses with our proven system. We chose the latter.

This led to pivoting our whole company and rebranding as **Sellio**, a B2B chatbot platform enabling any business to manage orders through familiar chat apps.

## Uganda Blocks Facebook Ahead of Contentious Election

President Yoweri Museveni accused the company of “arrogance” after it removed fake accounts and pages linked to his re-election campaign.



President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda has 10 rivals in the election scheduled for Thursday, including the rapper-turned-lawmaker Bobi Wine, whose real name is Robert Kyagulanyi. Baz Ratner/Reuters

# Betting on Small Business! Sellio at the world stage..

## \$50k

Funding at Meta's  
FBStart Accelerator

## 4k+

new small businesses  
added in 7 countries

## \$0.5M

revenue generated



*Sellio went on to become the first Ugandan business to participate in TechCrunch Startup Battlefield, was selected as one of just 14 companies globally for Facebook's invite-only FBStart Growth 2 Scale accelerator*

# Important Lessons

We shut down our 5 year long venture in 2021 near the height of the Covid 19 pandemic - we did not find business model fit and decided we had invested enough. Looking back, here's what I learned from this wild ride:

## **Local Context is**

**Everything:** What works in Silicon Valley might not work in Kampala. Understanding your users' reality is crucial.

## **Follow the Data, Not Your**

**Assumptions:** Our biggest breakthroughs came from listening to what the data was telling us, even when it contradicted our initial hypotheses.

## **Sometimes Success Isn't**

**Enough:** Having a successful business doesn't mean it's the right business. Stay true to your mission, even if it means walking away from something that's working.