Consumer Culture Plots in Television Advertising: Consequences of Globalization in Emerging Markets

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The goal of the study was to explicate the plots and stories used to promote global consumer culture in television advertisements from Nigeria. The subordinate goal was to understand the interplay between the global and the local in television advertising. The three major plots common in the 196 advertisements evaluated from Nigeria include: 1) Male breadwinner 2) The Big Man plot, and 3) Masqueradization of Western ideals plot. The findings concerning the interplay between the local and the global suggests that the global is more powerful in transforming the aesthetic of the local but less powerful in transforming social order attributes associated with the local.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the marketing and advertising literature, researchers have employed several methods including content analysis of commercial ads to explicate the impact of Western cultural values on the promotion of goods and services in the global marketplace (e.g., Lin 1993; Tse, Belk and Zhou 1989; Mueller 1987). However, in recent years, researchers have problematized the use of content analysis technique by suggesting that the outcome of this technique lacks the required rigor for developing theory.

In response to the call by these researchers (e.g., Zhao and Belk 2008; Ger and Belk 1996) for more studies about the cultural complexity of globalization in advertising, the current study employs a semiotic approach in addressing the following research questions: 1) What are the plots used in promoting consumer culture in television advertising from Nigeria? 2) Are there signals of global and local contention in television advertising in Nigeria? 3) Is there any evidence to suggest that the symbolic elements of the local traditional culture are transformed to promote a culture of consumption or global consumer culture?

The development of global consumer culture in Nigeria can be linked to: 1) the colonization activities of the British and other European super powers; 2) the missionary activities of the British and Europeans in Nigeria; 3) the activities of newly emerging Christian evangelist churches in Nigeria and 4) the availability of cable network programs (e.g., CNN, MTV).

The methodology used in this study is based on the theoretical frameworks of semiotics (Mick 1986), visual rhetoric (Barthes 1977; Goldman and Papson 1996; Scott 1994), the theories of dramatic performance in advertising, and motion picture narrative structure (e.g., Boller and Olson 1991; Wright 1975). These techniques are appropriate when the underlying objective is to evaluate the content (e.g., visual, sound imagery, settings, story lines, characters) of the advertisement beyond the obvious message implied by the advertisement (Zhao and Belk 2008).

A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used in collecting the sample advertisements. The advertisements (N=196) were recorded from two popular national channels (National Television Authority Channel 7 and Channel 5). The advertisements included in the final sample were selected based on three criteria. First, the ad must promote a consumer product; all non-consumer product ads were excluded from the final sample. Second, the ads must have human characters must be over 10 seconds long. The final requirement was the conceptual richness of the narrative plot. This form of selective sampling is common in studies using semiotic analysis (e.g., Mick and Oswald 2006). The evaluation and interpretation of the advertisements from Nigeria was conducted by the author and a linguistic graduate who is a native of Nigeria.

The initial analysis revealed seven main plots. However, a closer examination of these initial plots and more iteration resulted in the identification of three unique plots: 1) Male breadwinner 2) The Big man plot and 3) Masqueradization of Western Ideals.

**Male breadwinner.** The Male breadwinner (MBW) plot usually begins in a family house or the husband’s place of work. If the setting is a family house, the housewife is usually busy with housekeeping activities such as cooking and bringing food to the family. In this plot, the male breadwinner is either at work, coming home from work, or on his way to work. If his coming back home from work, his arrival at the house tends to coincide with dinner time. For this plot to be complete, the product or service must be useful to the housewife in appeasing the husband.

**The big man plot.** The protagonist in this plot is the big man (TBM). The big man (TBM) is well informed and eager to provide advice for resolving problems. The big man exhibits contradictory traits; he’s endowed with both altruistic and egoistic traits. For example, if someone is ill or distressed, TBM will offer product information that can help cure the illness. In some cases, TBM will offer a free trial of the product, but not without openly rebuking the person needing assistance. TBM ideal in Nigeria, or Oga mentalty, is synonymous with hegemonic masculinity (Linsay 2003). TBM is the man who spreads resources to his family members, extended family members and networks outside his family (Linsay 2003). TBM ethos is the most dominant male aspiration in Nigeria (Falola 1999; Linsay 2003). TBM plot also provides some clues about the dynamics of leadership, power relations, and social hierarchy in Nigeria.

**Masqueradization of Western Ideals.** The general gist of the plot is that people can derive hedonic experiences (happiness, enjoyment, pleasure) by constructing identity that mimics Western ideals. The masquerading concept is underscored because the context always involves dancing, festivities, enjoyment and fun. Additionally, the notion of masquerading is an analogy for illustrating the three dominant themes associated with the plot. The dominant themes associated with the masqueradization plot are: 1) masquerading Western aesthetics (e.g., Western bodily beauty, Western music and Western architecture), 2) masquerading classical Western theatrical performance (expressing Western rock star-like personality, mimicking Western romantic motifs) and 3) Appreciating modern products and showcasing traditional fashion.

Overall, the results showed that advertisers in Nigeria highlight the global through the overwhelming display of Western aesthetic attributes (e.g., Western music, Western-style design—furnishing, images of Western cities, architecture). The presentation of the global is not modified or re-signified to fit the local. The local is relegated and suppressed via wholesale presentation of Western aesthetic attributes. Occasionally, the use of traditional-style fashion may be used to legitimate the overwhelming display of Western aesthetic attributes. The findings concerning the interplay between the local and the global suggests that the global is more powerful in transforming the aesthetic of the local but less powerful in transforming social order attributes associated with the local.

REFERENCES


