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## A Qualitative Examination of the Effectiveness of Cultural Elements in the Advertisements of Telecoms Brands in Nigeria: Views from the Industry

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### **Abstract:**

*The incessant complaints and highlight of the total neglect of cultural values of varied domestic consumers in global campaigns of multinationals has become an issue at the center of research concerns among scholars and practitioners of advertising in Nigeria. Literature, in a pointer to this, has further affirmed that consistent neglect of the use of cultural elements in global commercials had altered consumers' perception of the various brands and subsequently affected their patronage. The outlying cause of these problems is unconnected to the perceived cultural imperialism tendencies inherent in the 'strategic and deliberate failure' of global companies to adapt to social preferences, reveal cultural values, expose norms, and reflect the era people live in (glocalization strategy – global thinking, local acting). Several efforts by scholars in this regard have been largely from the subscribers' point of view with little or no efforts regarding the views from the industry. The study adopted the survey design (in-depth interview) among the creative directors (informants) of the four advertising agencies that handle the account of the four selected telecommunications companies – DDB (MTN), X3M Ideas (Glo), Noah's Ark (Airtel) and Blue Seal (9Mobile). Three (3) of the interviews were conducted via mail, while the fourth was conducted via telephone. Findings revealed that the choice of cultural reflections in advertisements transcends one particular culture, and cut across the various ethnic groups in the country; and that the adoption of cultural elements as glocal advertising strategy in television advertisements of telecommunications service providers has made the advertisements effective in the attainment of their objectives – persuading and improving on the number of subscribers to their services among the residents in Southwest Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** *Glocal advertising, telecommunications brands, cultural elements, glocalisation advertising agencies*

### **1. Background to the Study**

Culture is a major demographic variable and a vital advertising strategy used in market segmentation. Consequently, ethnic related research has been a major concern of marketing and advertising researchers globally. Depictions of ethnic identity, which is majorly characterized by their cultural values in the media, have also become one of the barometers in measuring social attitudes toward multi-culturism.

Nigeria, being the most populous in Africa according to government, is one of the most ethnic diverse nations of the black race. With over two hundred million people (citypopulation.de, 2020) and two hundred and fifty different ethnic tribes, majorly from three globally known ethnic groups – Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, the country becomes a major hub of commercialization in the Africa continent. Therefore, advertisers' interest in Nigeria with her attendant markets becomes inevitable.

The history of the telecommunications industry in Nigeria traced back to 1886 when telegraphic submarine cable lines were laid by the British firm, Cable & Wireless as a need for the colonial government to connect with other colonial administration in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gambia and England. Lagos, Jebba and Ilorin became the pioneers to be provided with telephone lines. With the development, Nigeria birthed her first indigenous telecommunication line (NITEL) and for a very long time enjoyed the monopoly of the market. However, some attendant challenges, majorly poor services, led to the clamour for the deregulation of the sector. With the advocacy for deregulation, the telecoms industry had its major glimpse into the Nigerian market with the coming of the Global System for Communication (GSM) in 2001 with the launch of the

first two major private telecommunication companies – Econet (now Airtel) going head-to-head with MTN. Even though Econet (now Airtel) pioneered the race, but both with MTN get started in August 2001.

The emerging competition among the telecom companies coupled with the battle for supremacy and profitability, no doubt, attracted them to their unbridled incursion into the advertising businesses basically to build preference for their individual brands. The last two decades have witnessed tremendous advertising competitiveness among the major brands – Econet (now Airtel), MTN, Glo and Etisalat (now 9Mobile) which are the samples for this study. Despite the high degree of creativity exhibited by the various advertising agencies in charge of these brands, one major factor that has been singled out for the effectiveness or otherwise of the various campaigns is portrayal of cultural diversity – language, dressing, ornaments, art/crafts and music - of the target audiences in the television advertisements of these brands. While several studies (Tejuoso, Adekoya & Ajilore, 2019; Lin *et al*, 2012; Volker & Alwyns, 2013) have affirmed that audience exposure to cultural elements in some telecom advertisements improves their perceptions and promote positive attitudes (effectiveness) towards the advertised brands. One major gap is that findings of the studies are majorly consumers (subscribers) driven; there have been a few systematic studies that portray the view from the industry.

## 2. Literature Review

Global competition requires international business strategy, which would demand companies an effective internal strength over opportunities and challenges encountered at international borders (Verbeke, Li & Goerzen, 2009).

Despite the development of globalised markets, with its attendant standardized products and marketing activities, marketers must be aware of various environmental differences that have to be addressed while entering a new market. These environmental factors differentiate the domestic market from international markets and must be included while planning a product's marketing strategy (Cateora, 2012). They include various cultural, social and legal/political factors (Ricks, 2003; Root, 2007; Terpstra 2007). Cultural factors, in particular the cultural elements – dressing, language and settings are of concerns to marketers as creative strategy in advertising practice, while others are more general in nature (Boddewyn, 2016). Such advertising strategy can have a major influence on the degree of standardization allowed for a marketing program.

Most multinational companies usually apply the standardization strategy which Levitt (1983) in Tra, M. (2007) describes as a scenario where markets are being homogenised worldwide, as are peoples' needs and wishes to some elements of advertising. The strategy of standardization has been successful in a multitude of cases and is approved by marketing managers due to its cost effectiveness. Notwithstanding the unprecedented growth of the internet and its commercial applications, which have helped the standardization approach, the idea of 'homogenised cultures' has been met with strong resistance.

In order to overcome the cultural boundaries and to transmit a message across cultures effectively and respectfully, an emerging approach that seems to achieve better results than the standardization approach consists in the adaptation or localization of the original advertising strategy. Papavassiliou & Stathakopoulos (2007) also provide a list of arguments by the proponents of the adaptation or localization approach:

- Separate messages should be used to reach buyers in different markets by fitting the message to each particular country.
- There are insurmountable differences (e.g. cultural, economic, legal, media and product dissimilarities) among countries and even among regions of the same country.
- These differences necessitate the adaptation or development of new/different advertising strategies.
- Assuming similar buying motives for consumers across foreign markets may be simplistic, or even dangerous.

Therefore, an immediate consequence for any organisation cited in Chaffey (2002) that wishes to compete in the global marketplace, as noted by Quelch and Klein is that it needs an 'in-depth understanding of foreign marketing environments to assess the advantages of her own products and services' (p.5).

One of the most revered scholarly efforts in the standardization and adaptation studies was by Chaffey (2000), who viewed the issue from the linguistic (Translation Studies) perspectives. In his opinion, one of the means through which advertising over time has been glocalised is through language (copy contents) translation to suit the discerning cultures. Chaffey acknowledges, 'Language and cultural understanding may also present a problem (...)' On the other hand, Quelch & Klein note that the growth of the use of the internet for business will accelerate the trend of English becoming the lingua franca of commerce (p.132).

Chaffey, while adapting Vermeer's definition of translation (1994), argues, 'To translate advertising means to produce an advertisement in a target setting for a target purpose and target addressees in target circumstances.' In a related development while explaining Vermeer's theory of purpose, Nord (2000) indicates that Vermeer considers translation to be a type of transfer where communicative verbal and non-verbal signs are transferred from one language into another. Nord continues, 'This transfer contains an intention while being a part of situation. Since situations are embedded in cultures, any evaluation of a particular situation, of its verbalized and non-verbalized elements depends on the status it has in a particular culture system (p.13).'

To this end, Vermeer's approach is crucial to cross-cultural advertising because it agrees with and fulfills the needs of an adaptation approach; more so as it satisfies the requirements of the advertising world, unlike Toury's (2013) definition which sees translation as a...communication in translated messages within a certain cultural-linguistic system, with all relevant consequences for the development and decomposition of the source language, the establishment of the invariant, its transfer across the cultural-linguistic border and the recomposition of the target message (p.37).

In cross-cultural advertising, it seems more of a problem to establish the invariant, - since although the creation of a super brand would indeed involve the establishment of core invariants – in many cases there is no such thing while translating marketing communications. The key message an advertiser wants to communicate to one culture or market is not necessarily the key message the advertiser wants to communicate to another culture or market. This opinion is further supported by Arrojo's discussion on essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches. In Translation Studies, according to Arrojo, the anti-essentialist postmodernists share as a common ground a radical distrust of the possibility of any intrinsically stable meaning that could be fully present in texts or in any form of oral or written discourse and, thus, supposedly recoverable and repeated elsewhere without the interference of the subjects, as well as the cultural, historical, ideological or political circumstances involved (p.102).

Deductive from Chaffey's submission above is that companies have had to learn that, in this globalisation age, the blurring of cultural differences does not translate to disrespecting the local culture; rather, in every market, respect is measured in accordance with the effort that each brand shows in understanding the local culture.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The theory posits that individuals seek to maintain consistency among multiple cognitions such as thoughts, behaviours, attitudes, values or beliefs (Miller, Clarke and Jehle, 2016). The theory, as observed by Stone, Aronson, and Crane (1994), is somewhat counter-intuitive and, in fact, fits into a category of counter-intuitive social psychology theories, sometimes referred to as *action-opinion theories*. The fundamental characteristic of action opinion theories is that they propose that actions can influence subsequent beliefs and attitudes. This is counter-intuitive in that it would seem logical that our actions are the result of our beliefs/attitudes, not the cause of them.

In this context, one would observe that initially when the telecommunications companies commenced operation in Nigeria, their advertisements were diluted with cultures that are alien (standardized) to the cultural beliefs and values of the Nigerian people. They refused to localize their advertisements through the adoption of indigenous languages, (Yoruba, Igbo or Hausa), dressings (iro, buba, dansiki, kembe, abetiaja), settings (locations), arts and crafts, music (traditional drums, folk dance) and ornaments (beads) among others to adequately capture the attention of the audience (potential subscribers) and to make them feel involved, which have caused inconsistencies among their target audiences.

However, the telecommunications companies, in not too long a time, realised the seemingly positive impact that localization could have on both the image of their organisation as well as their sales, thus the sudden change in paradigm from standardization (global) to adaptation (local) of their advertisements. This is congruent with the cognitive dissonance theory assumptions (i) that consumers are sensitive to inconsistencies between actions (what they are exposed to in telecommunications advertisements) and beliefs (their cultural experience) and (ii) that recognition of this inconsistency (adoption of alien cultural touch in the contents of telecommunications television advertisements) will cause dissonance (undesired response from the audience) and such will motivate an individual (in this case, the advertisers) to resolve the dissonance by localizing their advertisements through the adoption of indigenous languages, dressings, settings (as in locations), arts and crafts, and music among others to adequately capture attention of the audience (potential subscribers) and to make them feel involved to get desired responses.

### 4. Methodology

The study adopted the survey design strictly in-depth interview among the creative directors or account planning executives (informants) of the four advertising agencies that handle the accounts of the four selected telecommunications companies – DDB (*MTN*), X3M Ideas (*Glo*), Noah's Ark (*Airtel*) and Blue Seal (*9Mobile*). Interview guide was drafted for interviewees to elicit in-depth responses from them for relevant hypothesis. Three (3) of the interviews were conducted via mail, while the fourth was conducted via telephone. Interviewer's guide was deployed as research instrument for in-depth interview. The instrument gathered qualitative data for the research.

### 5. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

#### 5.1. Analysis of in-depth Interview

An in-depth interview was conducted among the creative directors/account planning executives (informants) of the four advertising agencies that handle the account of the four selected telecommunications companies – DDB (*MTN*), X3M Ideas (*Glo*), Noah's Ark (*Airtel*) and Blue Seal (*9Mobile*). However, from these four targeted informants, respondents were presented in thematic form apart direct quotations to buttress the Tables.

<b>Glocal Advertising Strategies</b>	<b>Informant 1 (Airtel)</b>	<b>Informant 2 (Glo)</b>	<b>Informant 3 (MTN)</b>	<b>Informant 4 (9Mobile)</b>
Language	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Character (Models)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Settings (Location)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ornaments	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Music	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Table 1: Yoruba Cultural Elements Used in Telecommunications Television Advertisements*

The Yoruba cultural elements that were adopted as glocal strategies in telecommunications television commercials are dressing, language, character, setting, ornaments, signs/symbols and music. For the cultural elements used in the various creative of television advertisements of their telecommunications clients, all the informants admitted that they were motivated to adopt Yoruba cultural elements as a way of localizing the global dream of their clients. To the informants, their motivation ranges from creating a lot more culturally relevant work for their clients, the desire to create a feeling that would give the teeming subscribers a sense of belonging and to a particular informant, portrayal of cultural values being the core mantra of the telecommunications companies. Irrespective of the different reasons for the use of Yoruba cultural elements among these various agencies, there is a meeting point for their choice – it was quasi targeted at the Southwest region, where the largest subscribers of the telecommunications market exist.

From the data gathered among the informants, culture is sentimental and as such, each of these telecommunications service providers usually produces commercials that reflect the cultural beliefs of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria – Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo; even though they are aware of the multi-ethnic characteristics of the country. In his words, one of the informants noted, 'although, we are aware of the multi-ethnic nature of the country, we keyed in to the fact that others would have their links with any of these three majors.' The implication of these is that choice of cultural reflections in advertisements transcends one particular culture, and cuts across the various ethnic groups in the country.

<b>Glocal Advertising Strategies</b>	<b>Informant 1 (Airtel)</b>	<b>Informant 2 (Glo)</b>	<b>Informant 3 (MTN)</b>	<b>Informant 4 (9Mobile)</b>
Dressing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Language	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Character (Models)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Settings (Location)	Often	Yes	Yes	Often
Ornaments	Yes	Often	Yes	Yes
Music	Yes	Yes	Often	Yes

*Table 2: Identification (Awareness) of Yoruba Cultural Elements Used in the Production of Advertisements for Their Telecommunications Clients*

From the responses gathered from the interviews, the informants showed their knowledge of the different Yoruba cultural elements used in telecommunications television advertisements of their clients. Elements identified include – language, dressing, character, music, and setting. Findings from the interview revealed that among all the various Yoruba elements identified as content categories for the study, three (3) – dressing, language and character were prominently used as glocal advertising strategy by all the agencies selected for the study, but for Airtel, that added a general surrounding that was designed to have a Yoruba apartment.

As evident in the submissions of informant 2, language and character were major elements used in the advertisements of their client. 'If anyone has seen our 'Glo in the Air – Data is Oxygen' and 'Glo 3-in-1 Recharge Option', concepts which we have in multiple languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Pidgin), we played so much on language and character. We chose characters that reflect the dreams and aspirations of each of the ethnic colourations. For instance, for the Hausa version titled 'Funky Mallam', we used a celebrated Hausa model, the pidgin has Sammy Okposo as its character, while the Yoruba version has the duos of Alabi Pasuma and Odunlade Adegola as characters,' were his words. In his own view, both informant 1 and informant 3 admitted that language is prominent. This implied that character and language are key across board.

<b>Glocal Advertising Strategies</b>	<b>Informant 1 (Airtel)</b>	<b>Informant 2 (Glo)</b>	<b>Informant 3 (MTN)</b>	<b>Informant 4 (9Mobile)</b>
Dressing	High	Very High	High	High
Language	High	Very High	High	High
Character (Models)	Very High	Very High	Very High	High
Settings (Location)	High	Very High	Low	Low
Ornaments	Very High	Very High	High	High
Music	Very High	Very High	Very High	Very High
Others Strategy 'World Building'	Yes	Indifferent	Indifferent	Indifferent

Table 3: Extent of the Use of Yoruba Cultural Elements in Television Advertisements of Telecommunications Service Providers

Responses from Informants showed that all of the advertising agencies handling the telecommunications operators admitted adoption of Yoruba cultural elements to a high extent, even with other cultural values outside those elements that formed the content categories for the study. These other cultural values include respect for in-laws, and the tradition of taking care of grandkids in the first few months of birth. However it can be deduced from their responses that Yoruba language element was more used than others among the agencies, as not all other elements are common to all except language. On which is more used among the cultural elements, one Informant claimed to have adopted a strategy known as 'World Building' (use of consistent characters that belong to the same world) for their client. He added that the use of character is more prominent with their creative for their telecommunications client. Another Informant placed premium on Yoruba cultural dressing above other elements used in their creative. To them, elements such as beads, head-gears, Yoruba traditional caps like gobi and abeti-aja are considered extension of dressing requirements. He noted, 'In another of our concept titled 'Glo Oga Sim', we employed the display of more cultural elements especially ornaments such as beads, head-gears as an extension of dressing requirements.' As such cultural dressing is often used by them.

<b>Glocal Advertising Strategies</b>	<b>Informant 1 (Airtel)</b>	<b>Informant 2 (Glo)</b>	<b>Informant 3 (MTN)</b>	<b>Informant 4 (9Mobile)</b>
Dressing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Language	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Character (Models)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Settings (Location)	Often	Yes	Yes	Often
Ornaments	Yes	Often	Yes	Yes
Music	Yes	Yes	Often	Yes

Table 4: Adoption of Yoruba Cultural Elements and Effectiveness of Television Advertisements of Telecommunications Operators

All the Informants from the different agencies selected for this study unanimously agreed that the adoption of Yoruba cultural elements as glocal advertising strategy in television advertisements of telecommunications service providers have made the advertisements effective in the attainment of their objectives – persuading and improving on the number of subscribers to their services among the residents in Southwest Nigeria who are predominantly believed to be Yoruba. This they claimed is evident in the feedback from the subscribers.

Probing further on the view of subscribers about the use of Yoruba cultural elements in television advertisements of telecommunications operators, the researcher found out that subscribers' views were positive as Informants reported that most of the subscribers showed significant appreciation to the use of cultural elements in those commercials. One of the Informants attributed this positive attitude to subscribers' desires and love to be acquainted with their cultural values and beliefs. His words, '...our audience has shown considerable positive attitude to our adoption of cultural elements in our jingles. This obviously has encouraged us to do more in this regard. While we are aware of the need to localize our strategies, we feel strongly that one of the easiest ways to achieve such feat is through cultural appeal as research has shown that consumers love to be acquainted with their cultural beliefs.' Another Informant noted the feedback has been largely positive as evident in the number of views cumulatively across social media. This was further buttressed as he observes, 'The TV commercial had over 3 million views cumulatively across YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, etc. with over 70% of respondents alluding positively to the fact that the TV ad captures the archetype 'Yoruba Mother'. The implication, as observed by the researcher, is that subscribers have demonstrated a high level of positive attitude towards the adoption of Yoruba cultural elements in television commercials of telecommunications service providers.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This qualitative research set out to measure the level of effectiveness of the adoption of cultural elements in the advertisements of telecom brands in Nigeria. As a direct contrast to several scholarly efforts largely from the subscribers' point of view, the study focused on the views from the industry and built on survey design (in-depth interview) among the creative directors (Informants) of the four advertising agencies that handle the account of the four selected telecommunications companies – DDB (*MTN*), X3M Ideas (*Glo*), Noah's Ark (*Airtel*) and Blue Seal (*9Mobile*). The study revealed that the choice of cultural reflections in advertisements transcends one particular culture, and cuts across the various ethnic groups in the country; and that the adoption of cultural elements as glocal advertising strategy in television advertisements of telecommunications service providers has made the advertisements effective in the attainment of their objectives – persuading and improving on the number of subscribers to their services among the residents in Southwest Nigeria.

The study, therefore, recommend that while not berating other possible strategies which may seem necessary to their brands' creative, telecom companies should improve on their adoption of cultural elements in their television commercials.

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