

Original Research Article

Advertisements as Cultural Conduits in Kenya: The Case of ‘Jamii Milling’ Animated Adverts

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Abstract: Digitisation has given rise to the introduction of animations as forms of communication which have in turn been incorporated in advertisements, that aim to persuade while entertaining. Although advertisements aim at encouraging people to purchase goods and services, they have often been accused of presenting a ‘distorted mirror’ while reflecting certain cultural values of the countries in which they exist. In line with this, the study sought to examine the cultural values inherent in the ‘Jamii Milling’ animated advertisement. Using Langer’s theory of symbolism, the available three (3) different videos of the animated advertisement were analysed, with the aim of examining the signs, signifiers, denotative and connotative meanings inherent in them. The study established that although the advertisements were entertaining, inherent in them were specific dominant cultural values and that the advertisers demonstrated a significant tendency to focusing on these symbolic values rather than on the product’s attributes. Taking into account that Kenya is a multi-ethnic and multi-racial country, such a representation may lead to cultural stereotyping, thereby hindering social cohesion which is an important element in the development of any society.

Keywords: Advertisement, Animation, Culture, Kenya, Representation.

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INTRODUCTION

Culture has since time immemorial been at the heart of contemporary debates centred on identity, social cohesion and the development of a knowledge-based economy, with various definitions of it available. For instance, UNESCO (2001) defines culture as: “The set of distinctive spiritual, material and emotional features of a society or a social group and encompasses in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs”. Hall (1987) also described culture as the means and values which arise among distinctive social groups and classes on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationship, through which they handle and respond to conditions of existence. Conversely, Hofstede (1991) opined culture as the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from those of another. These definitions underscore the fact that culture is not inherent or innate but that it is learned and shared by members of a group; it is not static but dynamic.

In line with this, copious studies have established that advertisements act as conduits for

transmission of culture (Barton, 2018; Malefyt & Moeran, 2003; Pollay (1986). Advertising, from the Latin word “advertere” which means “to turn the mind toward”, is conceptualised as the structured and composed non-personal communication of information usually paid for and persuasive in nature about goods, service and ideas by identified sponsors through various media (Arens, 2004). It therefore aims at persuading a target audience (viewers, readers or listeners) to purchase a product, service or idea, by appealing to their emotions through gender identity, celebrity endorsement, romantic imagery, notions of achieving happiness or contentment and other cultural dimension not tangibly related to the advertised product or service (Malefyt & Moeran, 2003). What Pollay (1986) referred to as the ‘distorted mirror’.

Consequently, it has been argued that the cultural dimension of advertising came of age in 1920s when agencies and publicists not only conveyed objective facts about but also linked products with a particular lifestyle and prestige. By so doing, adverts have since then tended to reflect and influence the cultural values of the audiences who consume the

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content (Retwowati, 2015). It is therefore essential to analyse the cultural values inherent in messages conveyed by adverts in any social setup, and how these in turn work at representing the culture(s) of that society.

Advertising and Culture

Regarding the role of advertisements in promoting culture, the aesthetics of advertisements, coupled with their affordability, authenticity, and brevity, makes them an excellent forum that can be used to socialise a public to various cultures because they provide clues to gender roles, social values, and interpersonal relationships, while entertaining at the same time (Lee, 2002). Yet they are also highly complex messages and cultural content that demand cross-cultural sensitivity and careful exploration. This therefore requires their audiences to exercise caution when deciphering the symbols and any hidden clues. They can also be used in comprehending the behavioural and thinking patterns related to the daily lives of the audiences being targeted.

However, as Sillars (1991) stated, in order for the messages in an advertisement to be effective at persuading the target audiences, they need to clearly express and indicate values that are important to the audience. Hence, advertisers have to focus on the consumers' interests, desires and aims which reflect their cultural values (Mueller 1987; Pollay & Gallagher 1990). In line with this, considering that images are culturally sensitive, advertising should therefore appeal to the different cultures their target audiences possess by identifying the target market's needs, wants and desires and portraying these in the content.

Conversely, it has been established that some advertisers tend to support some of these cultural values more than others, while consumers have also been influenced by envisioning these values differently or by implementing new values altogether (Pollay 1986). Pollay (1986) asserted to this in his famous metaphor of the 'distorted mirror' that he used to explain how advertisements distort cultural values when they model and reinforce certain life-styles and philosophies, often those that serve the producer's interests and link them to the product being advertised. Thus, advertisements, especially those aired in televisions, make for a suitable content to analyse and explore the cultural values of a society (Pollay & Gallagher 1990).

Animation for Entertainment and Education

Television advertising on its own is a desirable and favourable portrayal of products which provides awareness to consumers, customers and ordinary people about various brands and products, with the aim of persuading them (Shimp, 1997). It affords the targeted consumer with the ability to familiarise themselves with the goods and services being offered. However, the evolution of new trends and techniques in television

advertising has led to the widespread use of animation leading to its popularity in the field of advertising.

Nonetheless, the use of animation in advertising is not a new technique, but new technologies and marketing trends have affected the way it is being used to sell products. Once a technique reserved for situations where there was little money or motivation to do something more creative, animation has currently become the technique of choice in many adverts (Callcott & Wei-Na, 1994). This can be attributed partly to the fact that when animation is employed in an electronic presentation, such as in an advert, then it may result in better recall as compared to when no animation is used (Park, 2006).

Also, considering that technological developments have impacted on the choices consumers make in regard to television commercials they consume, advertisers have been forced to develop TV advertising in such a way that it attracts and retains the consumers' attention. The end result being their adoption of animation in advertising, as animation can explain anything the mind of man can conceive (Khanam, Shareef & Khanam, 2015). This is important because as Siddarth and Chattopadhyay (1998) established, the consumer's decision to stop or continue watching a commercial is based on behavioural measures which are directly linked with motivation level of consumers. As the motivation level of the consumer gets lower, the probability that they will stop watching it gets higher too. It is therefore important for an advertiser to endeavour to capture and retain the attention of the consumer.

Animations have therefore been identified as having the ability to display actions and produce sound, coupled with their attention-grabbing appeal and comparatively low cost. They have become a preferred way to advertise on television in no time, resulting in more and more demand for employing graphic and animations designers in advertising industry. Thus, despite the popularity of animation in Kenyan television advertisements, there has been very little empirical research on the topic in Kenya. This study therefore seeks to contribute to this discourse by analysing how animations when used in advertisements can act as conduits for portraying various cultures that exists in the country. This is important because in a multicultural setup like the one found in Kenya, there is a constant need for socio-cultural cohesion, which is linked to national development. Accordingly, Capsha (2005) describes social cohesion as the glue that binds society together. Heterogeneous societies therefore need social cohesion more than homogeneous societies do, which can rely on their homogeneity to keep their societies together.

LANGER'S THEORY OF SYMBOLISM

Langer, in her work on the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art (1945), opined a symbol as

referring to any device that can be used to make a generalisation. She advanced that symbolic function is inclusive of more than language alone. Thus, language is a discursive concept with fixed units of meaning which can be joined to form larger units, all definable and translatable and possessing general connotations (ibid). These may include inexpressible feelings, desires, satisfactions, immediate experiences, moving patterns, ambivalences, and intricacies of a person's inner life or subjective experiences, that cannot be formulated in words (Reichling, 1993). Langer therefore suggested that if one symbolism is inadequate, human intelligence seeks another, which is a key concept in the study of artistic expressiveness.

A symbol is therefore a mark or character used as a conventional representation of an object, function or process. Symbols take the form of words, sounds, gestures and visual images, and as such, are used to convey ideas and beliefs. Consequently, symbolism is the use of symbols. According to Learner's dictionary (2014), symbolism is also the particular idea or quality that is expressed by a symbol. The *Literarydevices.net* also explains that symbolism can take different forms when an object is used to represent another to give it an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant.

Thus, words and communication elements such as an image or a dressing style counts as a 'sign' Saussure (1857), with the 'signifier' being the material vehicle for the sign and the 'signified' the mental concept it represents. Correspondingly, this study used this basis, to examine the signs, signifiers, denotative and connotative messages used in advertising the Jamii Milling maize flour, and how these in turn served in portraying various cultures.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative content analysis was employed where a coding sheet was used to reduce the adverts' content into categories that were consistent with the objectives of the study. The tenets of the Langer's theory of symbolism was employed in developing the coding scheme and in analysing the content of the three adverts produced for Jamii Milling maize flour.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Jamii Milling maize flour was introduced to the Kenyan public as a subsidised product at a time when the prices of the commodity had increased and there was an outcry from the public to the government. In response to the situation, the government established a multi-billion shillings subsidy fund, aimed at lowering the cost of maize flour in the country (Daily nation, 2017, June 12).

Together with other millers, the Jamii milling company entered into partnership with the Kenyan government to produce subsidised maize flour, as a

mitigation measure towards providing the commodity at a lower cost to the public (Wanjiru, 2017). Given this setting, it was expected that a majority of the public could pay attention to the product.

The flour is processed by Jamii Milling Company, situated on the outskirts of Eldoret. The mill was setup with the intention of benefitting the farmers in North Rift. This area is predominantly occupied by the Kalenjin and Luhya communities of Kenya.

Advert 1

The advertisement begins with a man (Wafula) seated beside the table near a window with open curtains and is talking to his friend Koimett. On the table there is a plate of ugali, a thermos flask and a packet of maize flour (clearly labeled Jamii Millers). The scene shifts to Koimett who is talking on phone as he walks towards Wafula's house. On the background is a hilly place with numerous trees. He informs Wafula that he is on the way to his place (Wafula's place) to visit him. Wafula responds that he is not home at the moment. Upon which Koimett insists that he will visit since it had been a while since he last visited and there are important issues that they need to discuss. Wafula informs him that he is in a meeting at the moment and if possible, he should come after two hours.

By this time Koimett is at Wafula's compound near his window and can see him in the house. Koimett informs Wafula that he can see him seated at the table eating ugali alone. Wafula insists that that is his twin brother and he informs Koimett that he has asked his twin brother, who is visiting from Kakamega, to draw the curtains. He then stands, draws the curtains and sits down while informing Koimett that he will call him once he is done with the meeting. The advertisement then ends with a display of Jamii Millers flour- nutrition for champions.

Advert 2

Set in a hilly, rocky outdoor with numerous trees. The advert shows Wafula riding a bicycle and carrying two packets of flour on the bicycle carrier. He comes across a policeman manning a road block and stops. The police officer greets him and inquires about where he is going. Wafula informs him that he is heading home after a hard day's work. The police officer (Koimett) then informs him that on that day he was carrying out operations to ensure the safety of the people. He then asks him what he is carrying. Wafula indicates that he is carrying two packets of flour for supper. The officer then moves towards Wafula's bike and takes the two packets of flour which he informs him that he is taking them to carry out further investigation because they look like gun powder. Wafula protests but the police officer insists he should leave and that he will call him as soon as the investigations are over.

As soon as he leaves, the police officer calls Chebet (presumably his wife) and asks her to boil some water because for that day, they will eat ugali. The advertisement ends with a display of Jamii Millers flour and the Slogan- Nutrition for Champions.

Advert 3

The advert shows Wafula seated in a car that is loaded with packets of flour. He is talking to Koimett and urges him to go for the Jamii Millers flour because the price is subsidized. He informs him that the 2kgs packet goes for Ksh. 90 and the one-kilogram packet for Kshs. 47. Koimett tells him to get serious and to which he emphasizes that the price is subsidized. Wafula then urges Koimett to join him in the car so that they go home and have a meal because there is enough for both of them and emphasizes on the need for co-cooperation in order for them to survive the food shortage. They then drive away.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Each advert had male characters, denoted by their dressing and naming. In advert 2, one of the characters is a policeman. This is embodied by his mode of dressing which is a symbol of the Kenyan police attire. Also, his utterance is laced with jargons associated with the profession, with words such as 'operation for the safety of the people', 'evidence', 'ballistics' and 'gun powder'. In a normal system, the professional code of conduct of the profession requires a policeman to conduct himself truthfully and in a just manner, devoid of any corrupt inclinations. However, in the advert, the policeman is depicted as corrupt. This is seen when he swindles the other character out of his flour. Such a depiction portrays the Kenyan policeman as corrupt, a culture that has received a backlash and protest from the public. For instance, according to worldpopulationreview.com, in the year 2018, Kenya featured amongst the top 10 most corrupt nations in the world, with the police department topping the list of the most corrupt government agencies. Thus, when such a culture is casually depicted in an advert aimed at convincing, albeit, entertaining, it can be presupposed that it has become an acceptable conduct in the Kenyan society.

The naming of the two characters used in all the adverts, serves in exposing the ethnic communities they come from. One is named Koimett and the other Wafula, representing the Kalenjin and Luhya ethnic communities respectively. Considering that the product being advertised is manufactured in an area largely occupied by the two ethnic communities, it can be postulated that the naming aimed at capturing the attention of, foremost, the local communities who can easily have an access to the product, then the secondary target audience could be any member of the two communities not necessarily living in that locality, but who may be drawn to the advert.

Thus, the behaviour portrayed by the two characters can also serve in representing the behaviour of the two communities or tribes they represent. For instance, when in advert (1 and 2) Wafula comes across as greedy, then a viewer might end up associating the character with the Luhya community, that they are greedy in nature. Similarly, when Koimett is depicted as corrupt, then such characterisation can be attributed to his community by the viewer.

The choice of music can also serve as a cultural symbol in an advert. Music in an advert affects the way the audience perceives the product; by different means and on different levels (Bruner, 1990). Consequently, music has a significant influence on the consumer's emotional state and mood, which in turn affects their biased judgement and opinion, such as enticing or grabbing their attention, if they can relate to it (Lalwani, 2009). Using different kinds of musical genres in the advert therefore helps advertisers attract the kind of audience they think will be interested in their product.

In line with this, it was noted that the adverts used music with a tune typical of traditional music from the Luhya community. The fact that the viewer is introduced to the advert using the tune serves in preparing his mind-set regarding the content. They can identify with the music due to the fact that music is inextricably linked with the context in which it is produced and consumed and that there exists an inter-relationship between music, society and culture, where social and cultural customs influence music practices. Thus, music and sounds can be manipulated to serve different purposes such as to entertain or play a role in cultural stimulations (Barton, 2018).

The gender roles depicted by the two male characters are that the man is the provider in the family. In most societies, it is typically held that men are more dominant, independent, aggressive, rational, and achievement- or success- oriented, while women are family- or relationship oriented (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Accordingly, in all of the adverts, the men are seen either shopping for or using other methods to acquire food for their family. The woman, who is introduced in the script via a telephone call by one of the characters, is depicted as being responsible for cooking. Although such depictions conform with the traditional African culture, it is retrogressive in a society where new social roles and values are being embraced.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In the foregoing analysis, it emerged that the most prominent cultures depicted in the advert were the culture of corruption and greed. The advertisers demonstrated a significant tendency to focusing on specific dominant symbolic cultural values at the expense of the product's attributes. This is

disconcerting, bearing in mind that advertisements, language, and culture are deeply interconnected (Strauss, 2006) and that adverts have the power to influence the values and attitudes of the society as a whole, while altering dominant values (Hovland *et al.*, 2005).

This is a possibility because Schwartz (2003) while investigating the influence of animation and sound on and memory processes and how they get influenced by animation and sound effects, discovered that the existence of animation led to both long-term controlled and short-term automatic attention and this further increase encoding, storage and retrieval of animated information. Thus, given the foregoing emerging cultural themes identified in the analysis, it can be inferred that the values the audiences are likely to carry away from the studied adverts is that it is okay and acceptable, even funny, to be corrupt and greedy. Taking into account that Kenya is a multi-ethnic and multi-racial country, such a representation may lead to cultural stereotyping, thereby hindering social cohesion which is an important element in the development of any society.

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