

A Semiotic Analysis of Selected British American Tobacco Print Advertisements in Nigeria

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Abstract

Advertisements are created for specific target audiences. Therefore, there are meanings usually embedded in such ads. This paper examines in detail six British American Tobacco Nigerian Print advertisements. It seeks to identify the cultural values reflected in the ads. Using a semiological framework of how images construct meanings, the paper sheds light on the various messages behind the ads and how they promote the Nigerian culture. The cultural values identified are love for fashion, education, promotion of locally made products, development of culture through drama and agriculture. The paper concludes by asserting that culture is a driving force for successful multinational advertisements.

Keywords: Advertisements, Culture, Print, Signs

1.0 Introduction

The emergence of multinational firms in Nigeria is one of the most recent developments of the last few decades. Ekerete (2001) observes that they devote a lot of effort to advertising. In such instances, advertisers and advertising agencies employ a variety of cultural values in their bid to attract their target audience. Moemeke (1996) states that as more international companies established their presence in the country, the need to promote their products was visible.

In a market economy, the role of advertising is to inform and convince potential consumers about a product (Hanks et al. 2009). Advertisers use various cultural traits to promote their products (Alozie 2002). Culturally sensitive multinational companies understand that there are cultural values, which need to be reflected and therefore, make accommodation for them, and actively project these values. Advertisers use the cultural experience to attribute meaning to the symbolic representation of the product. Advertisers must know their potential customers, develop effective communication with these customers, be conscious of communication challenges and apply creativity in developing their visual messages. Culture should be embedded in the message. Cultural meanings in the advertisements were identified by analyzing their iconic, symbolic and indexical sign as well as the codes that these signs signify.

The need to reflect the culture of a society in an advertisement such as print ads cannot be over emphasized. This paper analyzes the cultural aspects or values of the Nigerian Society found in six British American Tobacco advertisements. The analysis of the publications focuses on the interplay of photographic imagery and words, and the ways in which these generate the relevant signified concepts that promote the image of the product.

The following study questions provide a guide:

1. How has the Nigerian culture been represented in the advertisements?
2. What do the primary images represent or symbolize?
3. Have the message elements functioned regarding semiotic meanings?

2.0 Literature Review

The British American Tobacco (BAT) Nigeria Limited has been in existence in Nigeria since 1912. It has two manufacturing sites in Zaria and Ibadan. The head office in Lagos serves as the head office for West Africa and covers 26 countries. Functions of BAT in Nigeria include; regularization of the tobacco industry, providing opportunities for regional exportation, expanding both the quality and amount of tobacco grown and furthermore, establishing an independent foundation to address rural socio-economic development. Products produced in Nigeria include; Benson and Hedges, St. Moritz, Rothmans, Consulate, London, Pall Mall and Royal Standard (British American Tobacco Nigeria, 2014).

Foreign advertisers who enter an international market with a different culture, language, and taste and value system face potential problems. They are aware that they speak to a new audience with different value systems, a different environment, and a different language. According to Bovee and Arens (1989), a multinational organization is one that sells in many countries, they have strong direction and co-ordination from one central headquarters, and they have a consistent product line and a uniform marketing structure. Jones (2005) defines it as one which operates in many countries and produces in various countries. Douglas and Craig (2005) describe international advertising as a communication process that takes place in multiple cultures.

Multinational firms disseminate commercial messages to target audiences in more than one country. These target audiences differ from country to country regarding how they perceive or interpret symbols; respond

to the emotional appeal, as well as in levels of literacy and languages spoken. International advertising is designed to promote and introduce new products from one society to another. It encourages a desire for products from other countries. Hence international advertising can be said to be a potent force for change while reinforcing individual values and lifestyles.

2.0.1 Advertising in a cultural context

The way different cultures react to communication and messages differ. According to O'Guinn et al. (1998), culture surrounds the creation, transmission, reception, and interpretation of advertisements. Culture includes a way of people. Two important terms are important when discussing culture. They are values and rituals. Values are cultural bedrock and cannot be changed quickly or easily while culture affirms, express, and maintain their values through rituals. A ritual is a set of multiple, typical behaviors that occur in a fixed sequence and that tend to repeat periodically. These can include holiday celebrations, the way we dress and eat. Members who share a common culture tend to do a particular thing one way, and members of another culture do them other ways. Therefore, an advertiser who incorporates the existing ritual into the advertisement of its goods or services is likely to succeed connecting to the target audience.

Identifying some of the cultural values found in Nigeria will be of importance in this study. Otitie (2005) states that each ethnic group in Nigeria has its identifiable way of life, mode of dress and values. However, there is a feature of a common pool of cultural traits. Some of these traits identified in the multinational advertisements by consumers and designers. These are:

- i. Family ties
- ii. Respect for parents and elders
- iii. Character of communalism
- iv. Kindness to others
- v. Attributes of hospitality
- vi. Sharing with and helping the needy
- vii. Mode of dressing
- viii. Agriculture

The use of advertising to promote socio – economic development can be achieved by incorporating relevant cultural values and cultural theme in product and service advertisements. Hence, we can say that the designers have powerful conceptual tools at their disposal. Combining a keen sense of their cultural environment, their audiences, the elements of design, and an understanding of advertising as an art form, the designer holds exciting opportunity for expression of consumer needs.

2.0.2 The significance of culture in advertisements

According to Bezuidenhout (1998), Culture is important in persuasive advertisements and are transmitted through signs. Brislin (1990) defines culture as recurring patterns of behaviors and affirms advertisements are not void of the culture of a people. These patterns of behavior are employed to manipulate and persuade the receivers to simulate consumer behavior depicted in the advertisements. Also, studies have shown that advertisements reflecting some local cultural values are more persuasive than those that ignore them. (Alozie 2005).

McCarthy and Carter (1994) state that any experience or interpretation preceded by meaning already given within a culturally relative tradition. His/her culture defines the individual; no person exists in a void. According to Askegaard (1991), the importance of culture has become more recognized in advertising. Furthermore, advertising as a marketing tool has to pay particular attention to the habits of consumers. This assumption is buttressed by Bezuidenhout (ibid) that any cultural identity is expressed in signs. Cultures provide people with ways of thinking – methods of seeing, hearing, and interpreting the world. People have different interpretations to words. Designers make creative decisions from their aesthetic judgment. Azi (1999) takes the view that communication as a social function must remain to traditions, rites and taboos peculiar to the society it is meant.

2.0.3 Visual communication elements

The elements of design form a basis for any visual communication project. Bartel (2006) states that the elements are the primary visual material with which a work of art is created. All artworks require one or more of these elements. The most basic of visual elements are; the line, dot, shape, direction, hue and saturation, texture and scale. These features are visible in the multinational advertisements selected for this study. Stonehill (1998) affirms from these; we draw the raw materials for all levels of visual intelligence. A designer must understand the way people respond to various kinds of visual organization. Berdan (2004) states that this involves learning the vocabulary of design, and actively implementing components of design into the creative process of advertising.

2.0.4 Semiotics

The multinational advertisements were analyzed through the theoretical framework of semiology. The semiological analysis was pioneered by two men: the American Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). According to Underwood (2003), semiotics is important in advertising in that it emphasizes the usefulness of semiotics the analysis of signs and communication process in advertising. Peirce (1991) constructed a triangular model to illustrate the interaction between what he termed sign – object - interpretant. The ‘sign’ in this context, refers to anything from which meaning is generated. Saussure saw the sign as a meaning embedded physical object that consist of a signifier and the signified. The signifier is seen as the sign itself; the image as the receiver perceives it. The signified refers to the mental concept. Therefore, a sign is a basic unit consisting of the signified – a concept or an object, and the signifier – the image attached to the signified. According to Chandler (1994), signs take various forms, for instance, sounds and words, but for these types to be known as signs, meanings have to be generated from them. Reschke (2005) note that for a sign to be seen as a sign, it must first be interpreted as one. A sign has to represent something other than itself. We understand things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to simple systems of conventions.

The framework of semiotics is summarized into three main areas as follows;

- A. The sign: This entails the study of the various types of signs, the different ways in which meanings are generated, and the way they relate to the people who use them, e.g. the BAT logo and colors.
- B. That to which the sign refers: These are systems into which symbols are organized.
- C. The users of the sign: The culture within which these codes and signs operate.

From the preceding, we can conclude that the codes we use are familiar conventions arrived at by the users of those systems. Also, the value system of the users will in some way be incorporated into those systems. The objects in our surroundings, the motions and words we use often get their implications from the sign frameworks to which they have a place. We can, therefore, conclude that the sign systems we use are the development of our culture and hence carry cultural meanings and values. All these are evident in the examples of the advertisements selected for use in this study.

Based on the ideas of Peirce, the sign can be divided into three types, each of which convey meanings as follows;

Symbolic sign- means something that stands for something else. It is a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is simply ordinary – so that the relationship must be learned. e.g. the laptop on a chair in the BAT advertisement in figure 2 is a symbol of technological advancement and western knowledge.

Iconic sign- as one that resembles something or imitating the signified

Indexical sign- This sign is connected in some way to its object. It is a sign whose signifier we have learned to associate with a particular signified. For example, we may see smoke as an index of fire. According to Chandler (ibid) whether a sign is symbolic, iconic or indexical depends primarily on the way in which the sign is used.

Roland Barthes describes the levels of meanings as it applies to reading advertisements. The initial level, Denotation is the literal significance of a sign i.e. the starting point in which one understands the direct specific meaning of the sign. Denotation is followed by the connotation, which refers to the socio-cultural and personal associations of the sign i.e. the meaning that is evoked by the object is read. Denotation and connotation combine to produce an ideology that has been described as a third order of signification.

Semiotics as a study is essential for designers as it permits us to comprehend the connections between signs, what they mean, and the target audience who must translate them (Hodge, 2003). A product that may initially have no meaning must be given value through the product becoming the signified of the image that is the signifier. As viewers of a picture, the target audiences are the host to the meaning. Hence, they must insert themselves into the advertisements and find signs within them. By seeing images that naturally would not be connected placed in the same visual, receivers correlate those meanings together. This study analyzes seventeen multinational print advertisements. The analysis recognizes the outstanding visuals, their function as signs, and the denotative and connotative messages they convey, as well as the overall ideologies.

Analysis of advertisements

British American Tobacco Nigeria advertisements

Tobacco advertising is the promotion of cigarette smoking by the tobacco industry through a variety of media. It is one of the most highly – regulated forms of marketing and has been banned in many countries. According to Oluwafemi (2006), tobacco control campaign received a significant boost in Nigeria with the success of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). Nigeria ratified the FCTC on October 20, 2005. Consequently, a law banning tobacco advertisements in newspapers, magazines, billboards, radio and television took effect in the country on January 1st, 2004. However despite what was intended to be a ban on tobacco advertisement, British American Tobacco Nigeria continues to use newspapers and magazines for ‘non-product’ advertisements. Its ‘non-product’ publication has kept the company visible in the society despite the introduction

of laws. With the restrictions placed on general advertising, BAT has moved to new promotions to establish new customers and maintain existing ones. The following advertisements are examples of the change in the advertising strategy and creative process of the company.



Figure 1: “Nigerian designers have added more frills to international fashion”.
By BAT (The News October 3, 2005).

Figure 1 portrays a lady taking part in an international fashion show. The text reads “Nigerian designers have added more frills to global fashion.” Nigerian artists are known internationally even in the world of fashion. The lady in the advertisement is dressed in Nigerian attire popularly known as *adire*. The ad promotes Nigerian culture. BAT’s dominant color that is blue is also the color of the attire. BAT is proud to associate with Nigeria and Nigerians with the proudly Nigerian logo shown on the left. In summary, the advertisement shows that BAT is proud to associate with the Nigerian fashion. There is no association between the advertiser’s product (tobacco) and the image but as was stated earlier the company is now turning towards corporate advertisements as against product advertisements.

Educationally, Nigerians are recognized worldwide. In the advertisement in figure 2, the laptop (signifying technological advancement and western knowledge) on a chair indicates the recognition of Nigerian scholars, e.g., Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe at the international level.

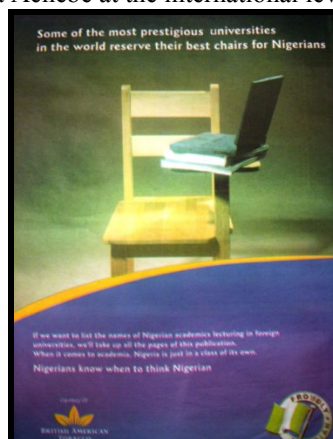


Figure 2: “Some of the most prestigious universities in the world reserve their best chairs for Nigerians”. By BAT (The Guardian, December 31, 2002)

Nigerian cultural heritage is very rich. Artists and performers have exported Nigerian culture to many parts of the world, such as the National Performing Troupe, which was set up in 1986. Since the 1990s, the Nigerian movie industry, sometimes called “Nollywood” (figure 3) has emerged as a fast-growing cultural force all over the continent.

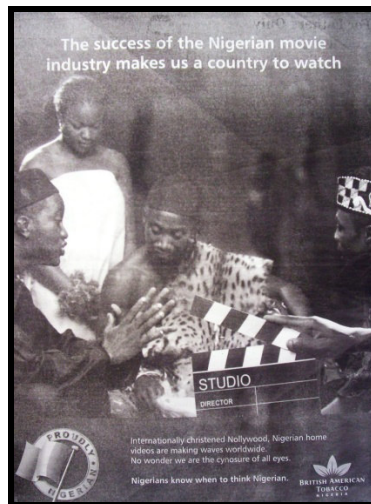
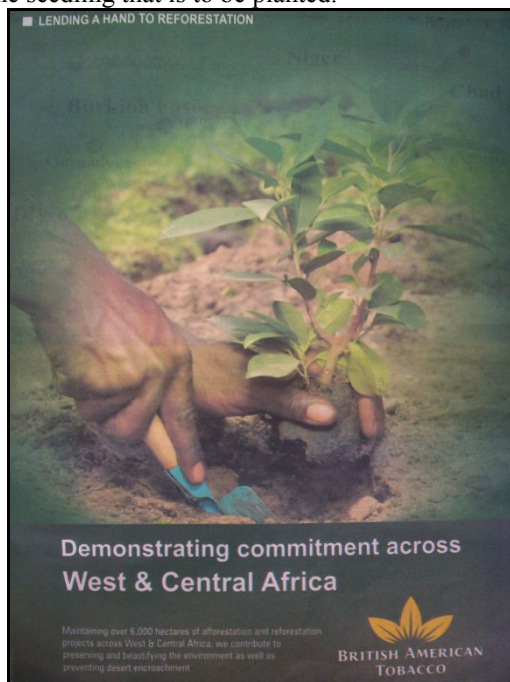


Figure 3: “The success of the Nigerian movie industry makes us a country to watch”.
By BAT (The Guardian, Sunday, June 19, 2005).

The Nigerian movie industry is making waves not only in Nigeria but internationally. The industry is not an exception when counting successful movie industries in the world. In figure 3, the advertiser has identified with Nigeria and their rich oral tradition and practice.

The advertisement in figure 4 consists of two hands; one is holding a shovel while the other is holding the seedling that is to be planted.



A



B

Figure 4: “Lending a hand to reforestation”. BAT (Punch May 18, 2005)

British American Tobacco Company is trying to point out the need for reforestation. The advertiser is in support of trees planted as they contribute to preserving and beautifying the environment as well as preventing desert encroachment.

Although there is no physical image of the product (tobacco) advertised, one could argue that the message is valid as they support and fund an important aspect of Nigerian culture that is agriculture and reforestation.

Our understanding of texture as an element of the design is not limited only to touch. Texture can be felt with our eyes. In the first image in figure 4A, the soil appears rough. The second image illustrates more in detail the rough surface of the soil when magnified. The above images give us a clear understanding of texture’s influence on visual images.

Figure 5 is yet another advertisement by British American Tobacco Nigeria. Like the previous ads,

4.0 Discussion

From the advertisements semiotically analyzed, it can be inferred that there exists a relationship between culture and the creative process of multinational print advertisements. An understanding of culture is an important driving force for multinational advertisements for it to be successful. Foreign advertisers could be hiding under the veil of cultural values so as to be relevant in the society in which they operate. In a cross-cultural communication situation, the use of signs in ads is considered to be an effective way of communication. In other words, for a cross-cultural advertising to achieve its purposes, the rituals, values, norms, etc. of other cultures must be appreciated and understood.

Images used in the advertisements were deemed useful as they reflected cultural values. A multinational advertisement is effective when the designer in a creative way uses appropriate images. Images are meant to attract the attention of the target audience, communicate product features and benefits, create a mood or feeling and also enhance stimulation hence, the preference for culture on the visual elements.

The following cultural values were identified in the advertisements:

- Figure 2 – BAT advertisement on the recognition of Nigerian scholars).
- Mode of dressing (figure 1 – BAT advertisement about Nigerian designers and international fashion)
- Promotion of Nigerian works and products (figure 5 – BAT advertisement about Nigerian famous artworks, figure 6 – BAT advertisement about Nigerian leather works).
- Promotion of culture through drama (figure 3 - BAT advertisement about Nigerian movie industry).
- Agriculture (figure 4 - BAT advertisement about reforestation).

Advertisers and designers should endeavor to understand the culture of the society in which they operate.

5.0 Conclusion

From the result of this study, it was found that culture is a driving force for successful multinational advertisements.

5.0.1 Recommendations

1. Since consumers are the target of an ad, there should be adequate research on consumer behavior by the advertiser.
2. For a designer to produce his design plans into reality for a multinational advertisement, he should have sound knowledge of elements involved in visual communication and cross-cultural communication.
3. Finally, the advertising designers must ensure that they also understand the receivers of their creativity. This could go a long way in enhancing effective communication.

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