

# Children's attitudinal reactions to TV advertisements

## The African experience

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This paper is aimed at exploring African children's attitudinal reactions to television advertisements. A total of 65 children from four African countries – Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda – participated in 12 focus group discussions on the subject matter. Findings suggest that they like television advertising in relation to its entertainment features – especially when the messages feature children characters, cartoons, music, celebrities and humour – and those promoting foods. They also derive excitement from advertising messages that are presented in Pidgin language and/or humorously integrated with local languages. However, they have an aversion to messages that terrify them and those they consider boring. This paper supplements the existing literature on the attitudes of children to advertising, but from Africa as a different contextual platform. It also suggests directions for the effective use of marketing communications strategies in relation to television advertising for marketers and other bodies with special roles in communicating with children such as government agencies and NGOs.

## Introduction

Advertising to children as a topic has attracted the attention of many commentators and researchers, and is increasingly becoming a vital subject among marketers. This is not surprising as evidence suggests that children

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constitute a major market for commercial organisations (Nairn *et al.* 2008) and their roles in family purchases cannot be trivialised (McNeal 1999; McNeal & Yeh 2003; Young 2003; Shoham & Dalakas 2005; Gbadamosi 2007). As Chan (2006) notes, marketers are keenly interested in knowing whether their advertising messages are effective, while policy makers are concerned about protecting the interests of children. Integrating these two ends has been one of the major challenges in society for a long time, especially as advertising now constitutes a 'war' between brands and their presence in the market (Barlovic 2006). Meanwhile, while advertisers have different means of communicating about their products or services to their target audience – which in most cases takes the form of television, radio, newspapers, magazines, poster and other outdoor media, cinema, and the 'new' media (Yeshin 2006) – advertising on television offers certain unique features that makes it more appealing to children. For instance, it is reported that children spend 60% more time watching television each year than they spend in school (Annenberg Public Policy Center 2001, cited in Lindstrom 2004) which tends to support the claim that they watch a great deal more television programmes than those specifically created for them (O'Sullivan 2005). Thus, television appears to be very popular among these young consumers. It is therefore not surprising that extensive studies have been carried out in this area or related areas previously (see, for example, Morley 1968; Fletcher 2004; Karet 2004; Barlovic 2006; Edmond 2006; Maher *et al.* 2006; Panwar & Agihotri 2006; Chan 2008; Lawlor 2009; Lawlor & Prothero 2011). However, given the significance of culture in consumer behaviour (Slowikowski & Jarratt 1997; Lukosius 2004; Brassington & Pettitt 2006; Kotler *et al.* 2009; Solomon *et al.* 2009) some cultural differences between children from different parts of the world have to be expected' (Andersen *et al.* 2007, p. 340). Hence, in view of the cultural characteristics of Africa that distinguish the society from many others, it is deemed useful to explore this subject in an African context as such effort will significantly contribute to the literature in the relevant academic terrain. For example, it has been shown that African philosophy and culture revolve around *Ubuntu*, which stresses family atmosphere and emphasises that it is the community that recognises a person as a person (Shutte 1993; Karsten & Illa 2005). Similarly, research has shown the importance of tribal loyalty, group orientation, and obedience to elders and the law as some of the key factors that characterise the work values and motives of sub-Saharan African countries (Lamb 1990; Harvey *et al.* 2000). Many other arguments in the literature point to peculiarities of Africa as a different cultural context (Nwankwo 2000; Darley & Blankson 2008;

Gbadamosi 2012). Essentially, it has been noted that children in Africa tend to experience dictatorial parental control (Munroe & Munroe 1972) and are brought up under autocratic parental guidance (Kâğıtçıbaşı 1996) hence the overriding aim of this article is to explore how children in this cultural setting react to television advertisements and whether they exhibit a similar disposition to TV advertisements as do other children from other societies, especially as a meticulous search of the literature for this study suggests that there is dearth of studies relating to children and advertising in an African context.

### **Research questions**

This study is positioned to answer the following main research questions.

**RQ1:** What are the attitudinal reactions of African children to television advertisements?

**RQ2:** To what extent do these marketing stimuli propel the children to buy or pester their parents or guardian towards buying the products featured in the advertising messages?

### **Theoretical background**

#### *Attitudes, children and consumption: theoretical underpinning*

A rich body of literature indicates that attitude may be defined as a learned predisposition to behave in a consistently favourable or unfavourable way with respect to a given object (see, for example, Fishbein & Ajzen 1975; Sanzo *et al.* 2003; Armstrong & Kotler 2009; Schiffman *et al.* 2010). It is acknowledged that people have attitudes towards almost everything – religion, politics, clothes, music, food (Kotler 2003). In a marketing context, it is noted that consumers, including children, can develop attitudes to any kind of product or service, or indeed to any aspect of the marketing mix, and these attitudes will affect behaviour (Brassington & Pettitt 2003). However, it is interesting to accentuate that the extent to which attitude predicts behaviour depends on a number of factors, including involvement of the consumer, attitude measurement, effects of other people, situational factors, effects of other brands, and attitude strength (Mowen & Minor 1998). Therefore, it is logical to infer from the foregoing that culture will play a key role in children’s attitudes and

behavioural patterns towards marketing stimuli including advertisements. Hence this study is a warranted research endeavour, as marketing in one culture can be different from marketing in another culture (Lee & Shum 2010).

Although many things still remain largely unknown and complex in relation to the web of links that exist among children, marketing, and their consumption of goods and services, it is widely acknowledged that their consumption behaviour and roles in their family purchases are intriguing (McNeal & Yeh 1993; Chan & McNeal 2002; Caruana & Vassallo 2003; Fletcher 2004; Marquis 2004; Wimalasiri 2004; Hamilton & Catterall 2006; Clarke 2008; Nairn *et al.* 2008; Sidin *et al.* 2008; Tinson *et al.* 2008). One relevant example highlighted by Fletcher (2004) is the uniqueness of the children's market, as children constitute a market that simultaneously involves users (children) who are rarely purchasers, and purchasers (parents/guardian) who are rarely users. Yet the children cannot be ignored in family purchases as they play some roles in influencing their family purchases (Young 2003; Ross & Harradine 2004; Gbadamosi 2007; Lawlor & Prothero 2011) and cannot be regarded as being naive to marketing activities (Hill & Tilley 2002). These basic characteristics of children in relation to their consumption and roles in family purchases constitute significant challenges to marketers and researchers alike. Hence, there is a need to unravel how they react to various marketing stimuli such as brands, public relations and advertising, to name but a few. Each of these stimuli could also be studied in deeper detail in relation to the behaviour or reaction of these young consumers. For instance, in the context of advertising, one could examine how they react to radio advertisements, web advertisements, television advertisements and many others as individual advertising stimuli.

### **Children's reactions to television advertisements: a conceptual overview**

Television advertising, which is the main focus of this paper, has occupied centre-stage in the realm of marketing communication tools over the years. This is due to its dynamic nature as it can carry both sound and moving visuals (Ouwensloot & Duncan 2008) and also has demonstration ability, intrusion value, ability to generate excitement, one-on-one reach, ability to use humour, and ability to achieve impact (Shimp 2007). It has been reported that the new African TV market has more than 400 TV channels and about 50 pay-television service providers, and

TV is now significantly attracting media-buying investment (DISCOP 2011). Specifically, Uganda is shown to have a TV households figure of 1,000,000, while the figure for Ghana is 3,000,000, and those for Kenya and Nigeria 4,000,000 and 7,000,000 respectively (DISCOP 2011). The deregulation of the Nigerian broadcast media in 1992 has been noted to be very remarkable (Nwachukwu n.d.) as privately owned TV stations such as African Independent Television (AIT) and Minaj Broadcast International (MBI) have international reach (Jibo & Okoosi-Simbine 2003). It has also been stated that the Kenyan Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), the government-owned TV station, used to have a monopoly on television before the 1990s when others, including Kenya Television Network (KTN) and National TV (NTV) began operating in the country (InterMedia 2010a). However, it has been reported that much of the TV programming in Kenya is entertainment based, and there is not enough local content in the system (BBC n.d.). With respect to Ghana, there is a claim that the number of Ghanaian households that own a TV set exceeds that of those who own a refrigerator (Morgan 2007), and a survey conducted by AudienceScapes shows that TV viewership in Uganda is also growing moderately, with an increase of 4% between 2007 and 2008 (InterMedia 2010b). Hence, it is not surprising that this medium often attracts children's attention and is one of the popular factors that drive their attitudes and consumption in various forms (Young & Hetherington 1996; Karet 2004) especially as another study shows that children watch television whenever they want – in the morning, after school, during dinner, while doing their homework, at weekends – and that most homes have a television set in virtually every room (Karet 2004). This 'bond' between children and television on a daily basis suggests to marketers that it is a very good medium, with the potential to reach out to children. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, in these African countries, there is a divide between urban and rural ownership and viewership of television, with higher figures noticeable in the urban centres.

Meanwhile, it is important to address the question 'What is children's attitude towards television advertisements?' The need to explore this question squarely is the central message of an article by Griffin (1976). Even more than three decades after this publication, this call still remains largely relevant and useful. Interestingly, a plethora of other papers have since been written on this subject in relation to various countries, with useful points highlighted in them. For example, McNeal and Yeh (1997, 2003) explore issues about Chinese children's processing of advertising messages; Lawlor and Prothero (2011) and O'Sullivan (2005) are some of

the UK-based studies on what children think of television advertisements, while Curran and Richards (2000) and Koester (2002) explore children and advertising in the US. Also, while Tamir *et al.* (2003) examine television entertainment and health education for children in Israel, Dens *et al.* (2007) explore television advertising to children in Belgium in relation to parental attitude in this context. The key point in these findings is that children enjoy advertising, find it entertaining, may use it for their convenience and non-commercial information, and specifically like its humour, music, catchphrases, special effects, animated characters, animals with human qualities, celebrity endorsers, ordinary people, children, and action and stunts. This is supported by Bever *et al.*'s (1975) study, which suggests that children aged 5 to 12 gradually learn to interrelate their understanding of fantasy, morality and economics. While these existing views in the literature appear useful and provide robust underpinnings of children's understanding of advertising, exploring the subject in an African context still warrants detailed research attention since there appears to be sparse research on this issue in an African context, which is the palpable gap being covered in the present article. This is considered useful if viewed from a number of perspectives. First, cultural relativism, which implies that moral values are defined by cultural contexts, could lead such endeavour to enrich our understanding of how children from different cultural backgrounds react to television advertisements. Second, African children might be different due to issues about child development. Comparatively, children living in developed countries have a better CDI (Child Development Index) score than children living in Africa. In a report by the UK group Save the Children, it is reported that children in sub-Saharan Africa are doing worse when compared to any other region in the world. Africa scored 35 in the index, reflecting the high level of deprivation in terms of primary schooling, child health and child nutrition (Save the Children UK 2008). Third, it is estimated that most households in Africa live below the international poverty line of less than \$1 a day (Beck *et al.* 2007). Furthermore, Petrovici and Marinov (2007) found that acquiring product information is the main personal use of advertising in Bulgaria, whereas the Romanians' strongest personal use of advertising lies in its entertainment value. Koudelova and Whitelock's (2001) findings show significant differences for six out of the fourteen individual product categories they studied in their article on a cross-cultural analysis of television advertising in the UK and the Czech Republic in terms of creative strategies. Similarly, Donohue, Meyer and Henke's (1978) findings indicate that black and white children's perceptions of television commercials vary

significantly, while Wiman (1983) contends that children from homes where parents are strictly in control of their children's viewing behaviour have more negative attitudes towards television advertising. In the same vein, Bearden *et al.* (1979) also suggest that children from poorer families have less well-informed attitudes towards TV commercials. This is not surprising, as another study indicates that low-income consumers have the tendency to react differently to marketing stimuli (Gbadamosi 2009). Obviously, the foregoing suggests that some degree of variation can exist in how people perceive and react to advertising across various countries. Hence, unpacking children's perception of television advertising in the African context will enrich the literature in this context robustly. This is especially so as Panwa and Agnihotri (2006) suggest that, for effective delivery of advertising messages to children, it is beneficial to segment them on the basis of the culture and environment in which they interact. Therefore, the question of what children make of television advertisements in relation to their likes and dislikes in this medium of marketing communications in different cultural contexts has the potential to enrich the current understanding on this issue if closely explored.

## **Methodology**

### *Research paradigm*

The relevant literature is replete with arguments about the common research paradigms – positivism and interpretivism (Szmigin & Foxall 2000; Gummesson 2003; Weber 2004). While the former emphasises the importance of imitating the natural sciences in social research (Bryman 2001), the epistemological assumption associated with the use of the latter is that the subject matter of social sciences (children in this context) and their institutions are fundamentally different from those of the natural sciences, hence the study of the social world requires a different logic of research procedure that reflects the distinctiveness of humans as against the natural order (Bryman & Bell 2003). In view of this distinction, the target audience, and the objective of the study, the interpretive perspective, is chosen as the philosophical underpinning of this study. Indeed, achieving a sense of how children explore television advertising is not an easy undertaking due to the associated tasks: getting them to talk, observing them and adhering to the ethics (O'Sullivan 2005); children may even feel that they are being tested, which could affect the spontaneity of their responses and their willingness to take part in the study (Ross & Harradine

2004). However, after a pensive scrutiny of the available options in relation to the nature of the research questions, and the compelling need to obtain in-depth information towards answering them, it was deemed appropriate that adopting a qualitative stance for this study would help in no small measure to achieve considerable success in confronting these challenges, and this route was adopted. Besides, qualitative methods are noted as providing for understanding respondents from their own frame of reference (Collis & Hussey 2003), relatively flexible, and resulting in the collection of rich data from the participants (Churchill & Iacobucci 2005). The choice of focus group discussion was specifically favoured because it gives participants the opportunity to stimulate one another and share views while participating as a group. Moreover, as noted by Robson (2002) it allows access to participants who may find a one-to-one interview 'intimidating' or 'scary'. Given that it is not unlikely that children will feel this way if interviewed individually, the choice of focus group discussion appears logical.

### *Sample, instrument and procedure*

A total of 12 focus group discussions were conducted with 65 (35 females and 30 males) children aged between 5 and 12 in urban centres within four African countries – Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda – by the authors, who also moderated the exercise. Participants were selected from the main ethnic groups in these countries. The choice of this age range is supported in the literature for various reasons. For example, quoting Kline (1995), Priya *et al.* (2010) state that, although the attitude of children towards advertisements changes with age, half of them can understand the real purpose of advertising by the age of 5. There is also a claim that children above 12 would use a variety of strategies concerning storing and retrieving information, which would be similar to those used by adults (Selman (1980) cited in Panwar & Agnihotri (2006)). Hence, previous studies on this subject have used a similar age range for their sample selection (Ward 1972; Chan 2000). In order to be able to obtain a wider view from children of diverse social-cultural characteristics, most of the focus group participants were recruited from local schools, having sought and obtained the permission and the assistance of relevant authorities in the schools. Although no stimuli were presented to them, with the aid of a discussion/interview guide, the focus group discussions were designed in such a way that gave the children the opportunity to voluntarily and freely express their views. However, the central questions that guided the discussion



revolved around which various advertising messages do they like, followed by questions on why they like them. These were followed by prompting them to mention the advertising messages they do not find very interesting, and the reasons for their responses. Having fully explored these, the discussions were then tuned in to knowing whether these advertising messages actually influence them to request that the advertised products be purchased by their parents, and the extent to which this happens in their family. These discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed for *qualitative thematic analysis*, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) which comprises data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In accordance with the tenets of this method, the data were coded to reflect the emergent themes and ideas, and subjected to rigorous constant comparisons during the analysis.

Observing ethical issues in a study of this nature is extremely important. In the view of Bulmer (2003) it is a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others, which impinge upon all scientific research but are particularly and sharply relevant for research in the human sciences where people are studying other people (Bulmer 2003); in fact, Malhotra and Peterson (2001) argue that it is of primary concern when conducting qualitative research. Common ethical guidelines in research of this nature are noted by Fontana and Frey (1998) as informed consent, the right to privacy, and protection from harm. Accordingly, these relevant ethical issues were noted and observed. Permissions were obtained from the respondents' parents or guardians prior to the conduct of the focus group discussion, and the consent of the children themselves was also obtained. In addition, efforts were made to protect the participants from any harm during the course of the study. Furthermore, while the participants were all given refreshments in appreciation of their time for participating in the study, these were provided at the end of the exercise and were not introduced as an inducement for the release of the information they provided.

### **Summary of findings**

The themes that emerged based on the convergence of views among the children in their focus group discussion are presented as the summary of findings in this section. Essentially, these revolve around the issues of what they like and dislike in television advertisements as African children, and the role of television advertisements in influencing their product/brand preferences and family purchases.

### *Entertainment*

One of the common and major findings in this study is that these children like the entertaining features of television advertisements. The study suggests that the children have a great likeness for television commercials that feature music (especially if it is adapted from popular songs), dancing, cartoons, animals and humour. This was evident in the ease with which they were able to recall advertising messages that have these features, with vivid descriptions of the messages in the commercials including reciting the slogan and singing the tunes in the associated music. It is important to state that these findings apply not only to advertisements for products that are meant for them as children but also those that are not. Hence, entertainment is the key motivation in this context. For instance, some of the common specific examples of interesting advertisements referred to by the participants in the study include advertisements for mobile money transfer and sanitary pads in Ghana, the advertisement of Union Bank, Peak Choco Milk, Close-up toothpaste and Dettol antiseptic liquid and soap in Nigeria, and advertising messages for Mountain Dew drink and Blue Band in Uganda. Evidently, these children find television advertisements very entertaining:

The Shailai advert is very interesting because the fat women were shaking their buttocks. It is very funny. (female participant, aged 9)

The Kaspia advert is very nice ... the woman spoke for three hours even though it was a wrong number. [laughs] (female participant, aged 8)

I really like the advert for OMO and Chivita drink ... Because of the music. (male participant, aged 6)

My best advert is Yazz [sanitary pad]. I like it because of the way the girls acted ... and the song. (female participant, aged 10)

I find the Tigo advert very exciting ... the one which has a guy climbing on a tree for network reception. (male participant, aged 11)

### *Children-characters*

It is interesting to know that these young consumers indicated their liking for advertising messages that feature children. Apart from the product- or brand-related reasons, another main reason for this liking is the similarity between them and the young actors that participate in the television promotional campaigns:

My favourite advert is that of Stanbic bank ... Because it is about a child account called 'woba nti'.<sup>1</sup> (male participant, aged 7)

What I like so much about it is the way the boy ran quickly after playing on the dirty field to meet the mother. (female participant, aged 10)

[Why do you like children in the TV advertisement?]

Eeem ... they always make it funny, interesting, and very clear ... and I like them [the children in the commercials]. (female participant, aged 7)

... the boys ran and jump the way we always do when we are playing during the break time on the field in our school. It is my favourite! (male participant, aged 8)

### *Celebrity endorsement*

Another key finding worthy of special note is that participants are strongly attracted to advertising messages that feature celebrities. The most common reason cited for the liking of these messages is that respondents also want to be heroes like these celebrities. Several examples of such advertising messages that span various life endeavours were cited by participants, but the most common were advertisements that feature footballers, actors and actresses, such as the ad message for Peak Milk in Nigeria that features Kanu Nwankwo and his son, the television commercial for MTN mobile phones in Ghana, in which Michael Essien and Stephen Appiah feature, and the TV ad for Hwan Sung Furniture in Uganda in which Karitas K., from the entertainment sector, plays a role:

... Kanu and his son ... They both appear in the advert together, they are also in the posters everywhere. I always like to watch the advert all the time. (male participant, aged 8)

I love Michael Essien ... I like the Yoghurt advert ... I also like the MTN advert with Michael and Stephen Apia ... (male participant, aged 7)

Baba Aluwe, Sunday Olise, Zebrudaya and Kate Henshaw ... They are very good actors that I know in very good adverts. (female participant, aged 11)

Me also, when I see actors on the TV advert, they make me happy and make me like the programme. (female participant, aged 9)

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<sup>1</sup> *Woba nti* means because of you. This is a bank account for children below the age of normal account opening.

### *Food-related advertisements*

The study shows that most advertisements that revolve around nutrition – food and drink – tend to attract the interest of these young consumers and are found to be very exciting. Among advertising messages recalled and mentioned by the children during the study are noodles, fast-food centres, confectionery and beverages. The popularity of international brands like Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Cadbury and Unilever, as shown in this study, is noteworthy:

The Blue Band margarine advert says that as soon as you eat bread with Blue Band you grow, and the boy ran and started checking immediately [general laughter in the group] ... Growth everyday! Yes. I like it too. (male participant, aged 10)

... Yes, [giggles] I will say that is the reason why I like it. (male participant, aged 7)

'Freedom from thirst' [slogan associated with the Sprite advert] is another one that I like, ... people are playing and when they collide together, they turn into Sprite ... which splashes. (female participant, aged 8)

Another one is the one they did for Bournvital. I like that because it is the one that we all use in the morning ... (male participant, aged 6)

### *Local expressions/language*

Moreover, the study indicates further that these children derive special excitement from television advertisements that are presented with the use of pidgin language and/or incorporated with local languages, and their liking for such marketing communications becomes stronger when the advertisement is presented by a popular humorous character. This approach makes the commercials very memorable, funny, and entertaining to the children:

I like 'Honey Kuchikuchi' ... the man is funny and ... the beat in the advert.

The fat man who fell from the tree is very funny. (male participant, aged 7)

Eeeee ... e fi ti bi yu o<sup>2</sup> ... I can never forget that one ... it is very good and makes me laugh all the time. (female participant, aged 10)

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<sup>2</sup> *E fi ti bi yu o* means it could also be you.

All of us like Baba blue, our mummy and daddy also laugh when they see it. The way the man talks, and how they all did it are very funny. [This is the ad message that features a man wearing blue cloth, promoting throat lozenges] (male participant, aged 7)

### *Family and group advertisements*

Another interesting finding of this study is respondents' liking for television commercials that feature family and groups, especially groups of children. When asked for reasons for this special interest or liking, the most common response is that such messages usually come with fun and remind them of their relationships, such as those with their friends at school and other areas where they associate and play with others. Above all this indicates that such ad messages evoke support and togetherness.

### *Non-interesting advertisements*

Although the children-participants perceive television advertisements to be very entertaining, they also indicate some TV advertisements that they consider not strikingly interesting or entertaining. These mainly comprise advertising messages that terrify them, such as those that feature shooting, killing and witch doctors casting spells, and those that revolve around immunisation. Participants also express their aversion to advertising messages that are boring; in their words, these are messages devoid of music or something to laugh about:

I don't like the film advert because of the killing in [it]. It makes me very afraid all the time. (female participant, aged 5)

For me, I don't like the Unique Trust advert because the men don't know how to dance. (male participant, aged 12)

The one for Equity is boring. It keeps repeating things over and over again. It is not so clear. (female participant, aged 8)

### *Television advertisements, children's preferences and family consumption*

The study shows that participants perceive television advertisements as relevant to their consumption of goods and services, most often prompting them to request some of the advertised products or brands from their parents. Sometimes, their interest in particular advertising messages is driven by family tradition and consumption of certain products. While this

perceived impact covers a wide range of areas, very common examples cited are in food-related items such as requests for brands of sweets, noodles, biscuits and soft drinks:

We all like that [Indomie noodle advert] ... Yes. I can say we take it every day, so we like the advert. (male participant, aged 9)

... Yes, I told my mum about it, she also watched it, and we bought it ... we now enjoy Cowbell shake before going to bed. (female participant, aged 8)

Nonetheless, respondents state that, on occasions, their parents resist their requests for products advertised on the television. The common highlighted reason attributable to the reluctance or refusal to yield to their requests for the products promoted on the television is the poor financial circumstances of the parents at the time of the request. Hence, the attitude of these children to television advertisements appears to be moderated by their immediate family, as, in most cases, the control of the resources that would be used to respond to television advertisements as a stimulus lies with the parents. However, this study shows that television advertisements educate these children on brands and strengthen their brand recognition.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This study explores how African children perceive television advertising, with special attention to what they find (un)interesting and the extent to which this type of marketing communication influences their preferences, requests and purchases in their families. The findings suggest that television advertising is very popular among these children as they indicate their keen interest in its entertainment features, such as music and humour, irrespective of whether the message is specifically targeted at them or other audiences. This shows that the children perceive television advertising as a source of entertainment, hence the study accentuates its commonly acknowledged role of the creation of awareness among them as African children. This is consistent with the claim in respect of an African country that 'it is very common to see children, especially in urban centres [of Nigeria] where advertising media are widely available such as Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt, and Kano playing in groups and singing advertising slogans and sharing the humour that accompany many of these messages' (Gbadamosi 2010b, p. 206). It is surprising to note that the children commented on television advertisements intended for adult consumers.

This indicates a high level of information processing by these children, and the considerable level of their interest in advertising and its entertainment features.

Also, the findings of this study show that they like advertising messages that are associated with food-related items. This cannot be perceived as outlandish, as evidence in the literature suggests that television advertisements often influence children's consumption behaviour for food (Young 2003). However, the finding raises some ethical issues. For instance, advertising fast foods to children has been severely criticised for promoting unhealthy food products to young children, who lack the cognitive defences to interpret such advertisements, and robbing them of their best chance to enjoy healthy development and protection against chronic disease – so, it undermines healthy eating habits (Mehta 2007). This suggests the need for marketers to be cautious as to how this medium is being used to communicate with the children. Specifically, their adherence to various existing regulations in place is one logical way forward in this direction. As young consumers, respondents perceive television advertisements that feature children and celebrities as very interesting and attractive, which emphasises the fact that African children, like most children in the world, use advertising to fulfil their needs for love, belongingness and aspiration. They want to be like celebrities who are well known and successful, so their indication of interest in such television advertising could be conceptualised as taking a step closer to realising their dream of becoming one of these celebrities. The finding which indicates that these children like television messages that feature other children is noteworthy and strongly supported in the literature. For example, with reference to Steinhaus and Lapisky (1986), Wray and Hodges (2008) indicate that, when the source of the message in an advertisement is perceived as similar to the receiver, there is an increase in purchase intent. Given the findings of Lawlor (2009) which stress that children love entertainment in TV advertising – and which is confirmed in this present study – it is tempting to suggest that 'children are children everywhere'. This could possibly be explained in relation to globalisation, which covers a number of issues, including the activities of socialisation agents like TV, which is now making the formerly 'thick' cultural differences between Africa and other continents less noticeable in recent times. However, the need to still adapt such messages, to conform to local values and customs, cannot be ignored – especially in terms of the language of communication in the commercials.

Another interesting – and very important – finding in this study is children's interest in family- or group-orientated advertisements. Perhaps

this could be explained from the cultural perspective. It appears logical to contend that the cultural values in Africa, which are characterised by togetherness, collectivism and extended family settings (Beugre & Offodile (2000) cited in Gbadamosi (2005)) could be stated as the explanation for this attitude towards promotional messages of this type. Similarly, Darley and Blankson (2008), Nwankwo (2000) and Gbadamosi (2010a) all emphasise that the need to consider the peculiarity of African culture could be very decisive to marketing decision-making, especially for those international firms that have to operate in this cultural setting. The seminal and widely referenced studies of Hofstede (1980, 1983) also strengthen this contention that culture could provide a robust explanation for differences on various issues between nations.

Moreover, the children indicate their aversion to advertising messages that feature witch doctors casting spells, immunisation, killings and shootings, among others. This study implies, then, that the participants have a negative attitude to television advertising messages that relate to pain or fear. The significance of this finding cannot be ignored. From a broader perspective, it reiterates and reignites our consciousness as to the relevance of targeting and positioning of marketing communication stimuli, that children audience will exhibit different attitudinal reactions to various advertising messages when compared to an adult audience. Besides, this finding suggests that, while relevant stakeholders may want to use this medium to reach out to children on relevant topics such as immunisation or other public health issues, it might be helpful to considerably integrate issues that these children find pleasing with the messages in order for effective communication to take place.

Another noteworthy finding of this study is the view held by the children that advertising messages often propel them to pester their parents for the promoted items. Although such requests are sometimes not met by parents, especially due to financial constraints, they still emphasise the potent role of advertising in influencing their consumption behaviour in relation to various market offerings. Nonetheless, the use of pester power raises many ethical concerns, especially in situations where parents have limited financial resources. Parents sometimes feel they are being pressurised by advertisers through the medium of their children, and they often experience this as an assault upon their finances – and their patience (Preston 2004). Hence, the ethical problem associated with this point actually concerns the effect of television advertisements on parents as it can create unwanted tensions between parent–child relationships.



By and large, this study suggests that the attitude of the participants to television ads is positive when they are presented in entertaining form, feature celebrities and children, and are adapted to fit local values. The study suggests further that these messages do influence children's purchases, preferences and requests for brands in their household purchases.

### **Implications of the study**

The implications of this study are twofold. Theoretically, it supplements and updates the existing literature on the attitudes of children to advertising, but from Africa as a different contextual platform. It contributes to the arguments that advocate the need to be cognisant of cultural differences in various marketing contexts (Koudelova & Whitelock 2001; Steenkamp 2001; Solomon 2011; Gbadamosi 2012). This view is also noted by Solomon (2007) who argues that consumption choices simply cannot be understood without considering the cultural contexts in which they are made by the consumers. Second, the study shows that participants have been exposed to several local and international brands, including Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Bournvital, Close-up, Mountain Dew, Blue Band, Peak Milk, and many others, through TV advertising. Hence, from a practical standpoint, it suggests what could be useful directions for the effective use of marketing communications strategies in relation to television advertising for existing local/international marketers, those who are attempting to enter African markets, and other bodies with special roles in communicating with children, such as government agencies and NGOs. Indeed, the significance of the adaptation strategy in international marketing communications strategies is further emphasised in this study.

### **Limitations of the study and directions for future research**

Although this article could be seen as edifying in relation to the topic under study and its context, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. This is consistent with the notion of reflexivity in writing, which centres on openness and transparency in relation to the circumstances of the research context (Hackley 2003; Swan 2008). First, the data collection covers only four countries in Africa, which suggests a need to be cautious in interpreting the study as the extent of the generalisation of the findings is limited. Second, one key relevant question that must be raised is 'To what extent can we be sure that the respondents actually behave in the way they claim?' This concern is also emphasised by Shaw (1999, p. 68) who argues

that 'it is possible that despite the sampling strategy and tactics employed, respondents were not always truthful'. However, efforts were made to probe as deeply as possible to mitigate this limitation to some extent.

Therefore, given these limitations, there are some promising avenues for future studies on this topic. First, much as this study is designed to explore some issues that are fairly common to Africa in relation to attitude of children to television advertising, it does not suggest that Africa is totally homogenous – rather it provides insight into why deeper studies into this society are necessary. Hence, it is recommended that future studies should extend this research to more African countries. This could unpack many unknown issues, especially due to the multicultural issues that could be associated with marketing activities in the African continent. Second, while this study is about television advertisements, exploring how African children respond to other forms of marketing communications has the potential to unravel certain issues that could enrich our understanding of how these young consumers behave in relation to various marketing stimuli.

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