Role of Mediated Communication in the Emergence of Popular Culture among Youths in Africa: A Study of 'Big Brother Africa'

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ABSTRACT

This research studied the Big Brother Africa (BBA) and its role in the emergence of popular culture in Africa. It sought also to find out the influence or role of mediated communication the BBA programmes impact on its consumers and subsequent emergence of popular culture in the continent. The study adopted survey method of data gathering, wherein a sample size of 356 respondents was chosen. Descriptive statistics was used as method of analysis. The survey results showed that most of the respondents are consumers of BBA shows. The study equally observed that the BBA shows are characteristically sensual, promotes nakedness and immorality while trying to promote a western lifestyle in an African context. The study observed that BBA consumers who are mostly youths are influenced by the BBA Reality Television show, and consequently tend to entrench an alien culture as a popular culture among them. Implications of the study were drawn from the findings and amongst other, the study therefore recommended that the African Union and other sub-regional bodies should make bold to sponsor, and moderate BBA through the integration of basic African identities into their show.

Key Words*: Big Brother Africa (BBA), Computer-Mediated Communication, Popular Culture, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Youths*

INTRODUCTION

There have been important shifts in the uses of the media particularly television in the Africa public sphere from been government initiative tied to the project of national development and identity to broadcasting entertainment programmes and advertisements (Bourgault, 1995). This development was fostered by the entrance of satellite system and digital technologies into the broadcasting industry. They offer multiple video and audio channels to millions of subscribers in over fifty-four African countries and nearby islands (Tomaselli & Heava, 2004). As at 2000, M-Net is the first company in Africa to offer direct digital services to

subscribers in more than thirty-six countries. This is because of the growing commercialization of African television in Africa that enables the production and distribution of television programmes like Big Brother Africa (BBA).

Big Brother Africa is a new format that combines multiple "platforms" and creates numerous sites and opportunities for audience involvement and participation. Such opportunities includes a live internet site, chat rooms for viewers, telephone voting, appearances on television and radio talk shows for evicted housemates(who become celebrities), and SMS messages from participants' cell phones, which appear in a continuous scroll at the bottom of the viewing screen.

The programme's basic premise is the isolation of a group of young people in a large, sub-urban-type house with cameras that record the participants' actions minute by minute, and broadcasting the unfolding soap opera throughout the continent. Contestants are evicted one by one over a period of several months on the basis of a popular call-in vote. This interactive media opened the door to audiences to participate actively and influence the outcome of these simulated real-life events. Hellman (1999) claims that the audience is the 'new king' in the relationship between the media and its consumers. The countries represented by the original twelve housemates were Uganda, Angola, Malawi, Botswana, Namibia, Kenya, Zambia, Tanzania, South Africa, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria.

M-Net is the producer of Big Brother Africa although it later allowed national networks to broadcast the programme for thirty-minute nightly segments at no charge. This made BBA the most watched television show, at least among the youths, on the African continent (Itano, 2003; Wax, 2003). The BBA show's contestants were all relatively youths who are in their twenties, single, and English speakers. The content of the programme is characteristically dependent

on the sexual tension and dynamics that inevitably develop among a group of singles between twenty and thirty years of age.

The Big Brother project projected moral panic that led different states/governments, experts and moral guardians of various kinds to denounce the program. The mass media stirred up the debate, while regulators called for action and intervention to define quality standards and cultural norms. Many national regulatory agencies tried to ban the project (Bazalgette, 2005). In spite of the controversy and moral panic, the Big Brother project has succeeded (Ukudolo, 2003; Wax, 2003; Coppen, 2003). The panics were never unanimous and consensual, while criticisms of voyeurism and exploitation were countered by arguments about identification and voluntary participation.

Therefore, this paper interrogates the following questions: What motivates viewers of the Big Brother Africa to participate actively in this programme? Has Big Brother Africa altered the culture of its viewers? Has Big Brother Africa entrenched a more general culture among its viewers irrespective of their original culture?

The primary goal of this paper is to find out if Big Brother Africa generated a popular culture among viewers that is originally different from their traditional culture. That is, it explores the relationship between BBA and the culture of viewers who participate in its different interactive activities.

The secondary objective of this paper is to find out if the Big Brother Africa shows altered the culture of its viewers. Consequently, the paper focuses on the impact of the programme on the participants' culture.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Computer-Mediated Communication

The growth and evolution of communications medium, which comprises inter-networked computers communication i.e. the internet, enabled the rapid and fundamental socio-economic transformation (Negroponte, 1995). The scenario has successfully challenged the existing political hierarchy's monopoly of the communications media (Rheingold 1993). Through this dynamics, it has also influenced the various cultures upon which the social fabrics are built (Miller & Slater, 2000).

The invention of computer and the internet have changed communication practices online through the application of technology. Such communication is termed computer-mediated communication. It changes style and character of interactions, and how such interactions are shaped by local contexts (Cherny, 1999). Accordingly, Appadurai (1990) noted that these electronic and print media play a vital role in global cultural flows because of the electronic capabilities of production and dissemination of information, as well as "the images of the world created by these media" (Appadurai 1990).

The media became image and identities creator. Individuals belong to many communities, bounded to different cultures and in varying ways (Barthes, 1992). However, individuals within any community are simultaneously part of other interacting communities, societies, or cultures. Scholars have accepted these to be part of human society or community but have disagreed on whether such a community or cultural compartmentalisation exists in the world of computer-mediated communication (Bordieu & Colemen, 1991; Rheingold, 1993; Thomsen et al., 1998). This debate explored whether mediated communication created a community quite different from the face-to-face traditional groupings called communities.

Rhinegold (1993) and Agre (1999) noted that not only that it creates such a community but that online communities were replacing the face-to-face traditional groupings such as pubs and cafes as loci of public social interaction. The online communities have been identified by scholars as "communities of practice" (Wenger 1998), or "communities of interest" (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Uimonen, 2001).The interests are disciplinary in nature like interests in education, management, cognitive psychology, social, and other fields (Fernback, 1999). The women of Kuwaiti use the internet for political mobilisation and action (Wheeler, 2001), while American and other Western countries' teenage use the internet for dating practices in chat rooms (Clark, 1998). It can also centre on offline ethnic or national identities (Morton, 2002).

Interactive chat rooms and online spaces were often used to create new identities in ways never before possible and indeed bring about changes in conventional notions of identity itself (Turkle, 1995). It is called the virtual identity. These identities are continuous across several media and can be carried over to other settings (Agre, 1999).When such identities became a critical component of people's lives across the world, it is called popular culture (Dolby, 2003; Grossberg, 1989).

Popular Culture

Being part of popular culture is a key component of modernity and feeling that one is somehow connected to the global flows (Appadurai, 1996). This form of modernity structures the lives of African youths such that it dissolves local culture and memory into the influence of global culture on the other (Diouf, 2003). Popular culture is either good or bad, and evokes either anxiety or celebration (McCarthy et al., 1999). For example, the popularity of rap music instigated a moral panic in the United States in the 1990s, while the computer and internet have sparked more moral panic in many nations because of nudity (Halliday, 2001).

However, Hall (1981:239) notes that,

> Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged; it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.

Thus, McCarthy (1998) argues that people do not consume popular culture mindlessly and passively, but apply it in an innovative way in their lives to create and express identity. Identity in this context is therefore flexible and ever changing (Dolby 2001). Therefore, popular culture is not only a private pleasure or pastimes phenomenon; it has significant influence on the social fabric of a society, particularly on the youth (Dolby, 2003).

Big Brother Africa (BBA) Media Project

Big Brother Africa (BBA) project broadcasting provided the background or framework that linked the entire African continent for the first time. The television programme stimulated cross-national dialogue among ordinary people in ways that were not possible in the continent before (Dynes, 2003). BBA presented an opportunity for African unity, however rocky, incomplete, and partial. "It has done more to unite them than independence, the Cold War, or the pan-African movement" ("Big Brother' Housemates Here", November 22, 2003). Wax (2003) argued that "since BBA I see Africa in a whole new light. One Nation. One People. No Borders". The unification is based on shared conversation that ranged from the trivialities of on-screen romances to discussions of pre-marital sex, AIDS, the role of women in African societies, racial, ethnic, and national stereotypes, and the innumerable common challenges of many African countries. In this discussion, BBA provides a forum that is unique because it was watched and engaged by youth; it is viewed across the 54 nations' continent; it is located in the continent; and its programmes are beyond the control of any of the states.

The new linkage was made possible by new technologies such as satellite television, computers, and mobile phones, and none-profit television services such as M-Net. Previously, when they try to connect to one another, their voices are often filtered through Europe and the United States owned BBC and CNN. Diawara (2003) summed up this issue as follows:

> Clearly, the media have sufficiently wired Africa to the West, from the public sphere to the bedroom, to the extent that Africans are isolated from nation to nation but united in looking toward Europe and the United States for the latest news, politics, and culture.

BBA provided the forum for millions of ordinary Africans to contribute to discussions about critical African social, economic, and political issues. Tsanga (2003) noted that the "Big Brother Africa was truly African not because of its rainbow outlook, but because it centred on the lives of Africans as we know them and whom viewers could relate to."

However, the general response to BBA media project was characterized by "moral panic" and the issue revolves around "the bodies of young people and their behaviour; their sexuality and their presence" (Diouf, 2003).The outrage against BBA stems from its visual display of the semi-naked bodies of African youth on television screens. A Ugandan pastor urged people to pray for the eviction of the Ugandan BBA housemate (Coppen, 2003), yet it has become Ugandan parliament's cafeteria popular TV show (Wax, 2003). Similarly, the Malawian parliament attempted to ban the show, though a high court later reversed the decision ("Bigger Brother", 2003). These and other efforts failed.

Cherise Makubale of Zambia won the BBA and was officially granted a diplomatic passport by the Zambian government to visit the countries where the other 11 contestants come from with a message of love and unity. Significantly, former South African President Nelson Mandela invited and celebrated her for 'making a contribution to Africa' ("Levy Congratulates Cherise", September 10).As a

house mate, Cherise performed the African domestic role of a woman. She cooked, provided the housemates with fresh bread, cleaned, and nurtured. She won because "while other housemates were either having sex or drinking alcohol, Cherise preferred to clean and cook for them, depicting a more traditional African woman" (Jere, 2003). Others view the victory as a reversal of the dominant African culture wherein women's unpaid domestic work is so undervalued and it is time for people realise the fundamental role such functions play to sustain life (Tsanga, 2003).Till date, Cherise remains a popular figure and a role model for young women in Zambia till date.

Thus, scholars argue that BBA is gradually changing the traditional cultural orientation and or understanding of African youths. Diouf summarized BBA's impact on the youths in the following manner;

> Not only are young people losing the prestigious status that nationalism gave them in its ascending phase, but they no longer represent the national priority.... Excluded from the arenas of power, work, education, and leisure, young Africans construct places of socialization and new sociabilities whose function is to show their difference, either on the margins of society or at its heart, simultaneously as victims and active agents, and circulating in a geography that escapes the limits of the national territory (Diouf, 2003:5).

Consequently, Nixon (1994) and David (2001) argue that African identities are now at the crossroads of multiple forces. Many Africans embrace BBA as "African", limiting or reducing the former desire to be part of the Western modernity, and pushing forward to contribute to the global flows that shape the contemporary world.

This curiosity, and the associated moral panic fully explored in the literature, the actual impact generated by the BBA on African cultural identities and the possibility of fostering a more general but new African cultural identity among

28

the youths has been less explored by scholars. This paper attempts to fill this gap using Nigerian youths as our focus of study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts the Uses and Gratifications theory in its effort to comprehend and explain African audience reception of BBA, and its contribution the emergence of popular culture particularly among the youths. The major advocates or proponents of the theory include Herzog (1940), Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974), Rubin (1983), Ang (1985), Babrow (1987), Bryant and Heath, 2000) and Frisby (2004).Central to the philosophy or principles of the approach is that audience members actively pursue particular media to satisfy their own needs. Thus, the approach sees media consumers as active, sense-making participant that chooses content and channels they watch. That is, they tend to avoid media that do not agree with their values, attitudes, beliefs, and/or culture. The Uses and Gratifications theory also holds that viewers have their own preconceived needs and desires that they bring to the communication process and that these structures the meanings attached to media programmes or messages (Williams, 2003).

The Uses and Gratifications theory has four basic assumptions. These are:
 a. Consumers are active participants who use the media to satisfy personal needs/purposes;
 b. Consumers can identify these purposes and know how to express them; and
 c. Variations exist between the individuals' use of the media, but it is possible to identify basic patterns and habits in uses and gratifications by individuals.
 d. Expected gratifications/results are easily distinguishable from the actual gratifications/results obtained after media exposure.

Although scholars criticise the theory for its indifference to the contribution or influence of the social and cultural context of the environment on the individual's media choice and message interpretation (Reimer, 1998; Grossberg, Wortella & Whitney, 1998), the theory is applicable to this study. It enables the research to focus on the BBA consumers, to identify their reasons for and regularity of watching the programme and its actual impact on their cultural identities. Specifically, it enables the paper to find out if there is a difference between expected gratification and the actual gratification after watching the BBA project.

METHOD

This study is a survey research that used structured questionnaires to obtain data from the Nigerian youth. The goal of the study is to explore the different factors that influence and motivate viewers to participate interactively in reality television. Specifically, the inquiry used Nigerian undergraduates as its population of study. This population was drawn from the Department of Mass Communication in the Federal Universities situated at the centres of the six geo-political zones. These are: Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (ABU, North-West); Federal University of Technology, Yola (FUTY, North-East); University of Abuja (UA, North-Central and Federal Capital Territory (FCT); Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO, South-East); University of Port-Harcourt (UNIPOT, South-South); and University of Ibadan (UI, South-West).

This selection criterion was justified on the premise that the respondents belong to the age bracket of targeted audience or consumers of Big Brother Africa, especially in relation to such variables as age, class and intellectual potential and or depth. They have access to satellite television and are conversant with new media technologies such as Facebook, twitter, internet, and websites etc that are converged into reality television programs like BBA. Thus, they present

an informed forum that enables the paper to assess the responses of diverse African audiences of Big Brother Africa.

According to available data in the students' portal of the six universities, the total number of students in the departments is 3218. From this population the sample size for this work was determined by using Guilford and Fluchter (1973) formula for estimating sample size. The formula is:

$$\frac{N}{1+ \mu^2 N}$$

Where: N is the size of the population, μ is alpha = 0.05

$$= \frac{3218}{1 + 0.05^2 \times 3218}$$

$$= \frac{3218}{1 + 0.0025 \times 3218}$$

$$= \frac{3218}{1 + 8.045}$$

$$= \frac{3218}{9.045} = 355.78$$

Therefore, the approximated figure of 356 respondents was used as the sample size for this study using the above formula. Thus, a total of 356 questionnaires were sent out to the universities located at the centre of six geo-political zones of Nigeria. Consequently, 59 respondents were chosen from each university leaving a balance of 2. In distributing the 59 questionnaires in the department of Mass Communication of the universities, 14 questionnaires were randomly distributed in each of the academic levels leaving a balance of 3 questionnaires. Therefore,

with a total of 56 questionnaires actually distributed in each university, the actual and total questionnaires distributed for the research is 336.

Considering the distance, the researcher sent the questionnaires to some doctoral students in the faculty of Arts of the universities concerned who assisted to distribute and recollect the questionnaires through courier services. Basically, statistical tables and percentage formula were used to present the data generated during the research. In addition, the paper equally employed content analysis to arrive at conclusions therein with regards to documentary data.

RESULT

Table 1: Demographic information of Respondents:

School	Gender		Age of Respondent			Tribe of Origin			
	Male	Female	17-20	21-24	25 & above	Hausa/ Fulani	Igbo	Yoruba	others
ABU	24	32	21	30	5	17	9	5	25
FUTY	20	36	29	24	3	34	11	Nil	11
UA	26	30	37	19	Nil	14	11	18	13
FUTO	25	31	30	24	2	4	32	11	9
UNIPOT	19	37	28	26	2	2	14	6	34
UI	15	41	41	15	Nil	1	9	31	15
Total	129	207	186	138	12	72	86	71	107

Source: Field Work, 2014.

An analysis of the data in table 1 above reveals that 207 respondents representing 61.6% are female, while 129 respondents i.e. 38.4% are male. The sample for this research is therefore gender sensitive and appropriate. In addition, 186 respondents representing 55.4% of the total sample are youths

within the age bracket of 17 -20 years. 138 respondents i.e. 41.1% fall within the ages of 21 – 24 years, while 3.5% are 25 years and above. The implication of this data is that our respondents are the appropriate and most expected audience of BBA.

Table 1 also reveals that 72 respondents i.e. 21.4% are natives of the Hausa/Fulani culture, while 86 respondents representing 25.6% are of the Igbo cultural extraction. 71 respondents i.e. 21.1% are natives of Yoruba cultural affiliation, and 107 respondents representing 31.9% are from other cultural identities including foreigners from within and outside African countries. It is therefore plausible to assert that the sample for this study is a good representation of diverse ethnic cultural identities. It is therefore good for assessing Africans' interests on BBA and the impact of BBA on the various ethnic identities.

Responses to questions on the consumptions of the BBA reveal that 319 respondents i.e. 94.9% are regular audience/watchers of Big Brother Africa. Further, an analysis of responses to the question on why they watch BBA as contained in the questionnaire reveals that the audiences watched the show for entertainment (28% of the respondents), information (11% of the respondents), life/manner comparism with those of the BBA Housemates and stars, and change (39% of the respondents), and social purposes (22% of the respondents). Most of the male respondents i.e. 87 representing 67.4% of the male respondents noted that they watched BBA to remain informed and contribute to arguments and debate about the programme among their peers.

71.3% of undergraduates disagreed with the moral and cultural panic or scandal being propagated by the public against BBA shows. They largely identified with them, and desire to participate in reality programs, if opportunity calls, in order to gain celebrity status by being on television. Already, some of the respondents

have the BBA stars or winners as their model such as Luclay of South Africa, Cherise of Zambia, and Karen – a Nigerian model, etc. 58.1% of the respondents identified relationship issues, nudity dressing, sex affairs, fame, and celebrity talk as the major part of BBA shows or Housemates activities that are of great interest. However, 27.4% of the respondents detest the nudity dressing and sexual aspect of the BBA Housemates activities. Responding to a specific question on whether BBA shows or Housemates activities are real or not, 60.2% of the respondents said that BBA is real, 27.9% said that BBA shows are not real while 11.9% were not sure. Personal observation on the comments on the BBA facebook pages and website reflect that a higher percentage of viewers consider the show to be real.

A culture has successfully been cultivated into the mainstream through the BBA Housemates activities. The attitudes and beliefs that had long been guarded in many African cultures and customs are lost (see also Bryant and Thompson, 2002). Specifically, sex is a sacred and secret activity in various African cultures. Most of the viewers of BBA have removed all pretences from their social lives, introduced nakedness, sexy appeals and desirable, and public sexual activities in places like class rooms, student's squares, and clubs among others in higher institutions. Reading through male audience comments displayed on the BBA facebook pages and website, rolling satellite TV task bar, words like: "Weza I wish you were all mine", "O Hanni you are so cute and hot", "Babi, I wish I can push it here and now", "Wow, give me a date honi", are prevalent. 296 respondents representing 88.1% said that they feel sexy in a manner that take more than 48hours to control after watching BBA Housemates dressings and sexual shows. Rating this influence, 44.8% of the respondents found BBA shows to be fascinating and educative, while 55.2% respondents noted that BBA is pro-sexual rascality, nakedness, degrading and negative. Apart from the logic of majority, the 55.2% to be people with strong moral appeal who found BBA to be a bug in their moral and traditional social lives.

However, Africans particularly the youths have come to accept and cherish BBA notwithstanding the deteriorated moral behaviours exhibited in its programmes by Housemates. The Zimbabwean president, who lambasted and sanctioned Tapuwa Mhere (Zimbabwe's first BBA contestant), later hosted Wendall, Vimbai and Munya (who had sex in the house also).Equally, in the Richard and Tatiana (BBA II) affair, the BBA audience population voted for the adulterous Richard who emerged the winner. The voting seems to uphold and generalize as normal the practice of polygamy in the patriarchal African set up. This negates the Western moralized monogamy of one man, one woman.

The BBA tend to promote pan-Africanism and culture through its shows. During the first week of BBA seasons, contestants are given only a few minutes to briefly talk about their respective countries but after that, African symbols and rituals are kept to a minimum and appear only to appease a sceptical African audience who accuse BBA of being non-African.BBA allows contestants to wave their national flag as they enter and exit the program only. Big Brother Africa tends to enforce cultural convergence by ignoring the diversity in African identities and imposing the symbols and rituals of global and popular culture in the Big Brother Africa house.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Africa has differing traditions and social divisions based on gender, class, ethnicity and language among others, and these metamorphosed into multiple identities. However, it is apparent that the modernisation of information technology, the digitalisation of communication and the dominance of internet as a major means of communication have altered a lot issues particularly the African multi-cultural identities. This alteration has been advanced by the introduction of Reality Television shows such as the Big Brother Africa. Given the varied African identities in BBA the idea of going back to the source

apparently becomes impractical, and this has lead to the emergence of somewhat popular culture among the BBA audience or consumers of BBA.

This popular culture, although criticised and resisted by Africans and leaders for its alien nature and immoral character, has spread like wild fire among African youths. This paper conclude that the triumph of BBA shows and its efficacious impact in subduing the African identities is as a result of digital internet communication, which is beyond state control. The sexual, nakedness, and nudity character of BBA made it the centre of cynosure of youths who perceived it as the Africanization of Western type nudity, nakedness and immoral life.

It is therefore recommended that AU and other sub-regional bodies should make bold to sponsor, and moderate BBA through the integration of basic African identities into their show. Secondly, gradual but steady reduction of immoral and nudity appeal in BBA shows should be pursued. Finally, using the Reality Television shows, Africa should pursue the creation or emergence of an African identity through cultural convergence.

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