Culture and Values in Consumer Behaviour: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

The culture and values of a set of people regulates their behaviour and shapes their purchase pattern. It is for this reason that this paper seeks to investigate how culture and values affect the buying behaviour of different ethnic groups in Nigeria. The method of data collection was mainly qualitative with heavy reliance on interviews conducted with 26 respondents drawn from across the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria and across different levels of educational attainment. The study finds that although Nigerians have certain value they share in common, making sweeping generalizations in all respects is near impossible. The major areas that affect buying behaviour include the collectivist nature of most Nigerians and the male dominance which makes men the target for high involving goods than women. The study also finds that regional advertising is very appealing in the north due to the feeling of connection with the product being advertised. Similarly, religion plays a very sensitive role because it determines what people find acceptable in terms of products and services. The study concludes that although there is increasing level of cultural dilution occasioned by globalization, its ability to reshape the taste and preferences of consumers across the three major ethnic groups is only limited to values that are secondary.

Introduction

Human behaviour, regardless of where people live, can hardly be argued to be random. More often than not, people tend to cooperate with other people in order to produce the social world they live in (Umoren, 1996). The implication therefore, is that humans have to learn from birth how to be human and most of all, how to be acceptable members of the society they are a part of. By implication, the society in which people grow up shapes their beliefs, actions, values and norms. These values and norms are handed down from generation to generation through learning and experience as regulators of behaviour (Kotler, 2002). Within this society, people would normally belong to numerous and varied smaller groups like; family, educational, work, peer, friendship among others.

Too often, people abroad believe that Nigerians share a common cultural heritage which influences their buying behaviour in the same manner. Such stereotypical beliefs lead to sweeping generalizations in this regard and consequently they need to be treated with caution. Nigeria is characterized by several other cultures denoting a diversity of approaches to markets, market-oriented, consumer and buying behaviour. The focus of this paper is to examine the numerous features of "diversity" and how they influence the buying behaviour of Nigerians. It is conceptual in scope as it aims to obtain a critical understanding of the social and cultural ramifications of diversity and diverse patterns of behaviour among the people and communities of Nigeria.

To achieve this aim, the rest of the paper is divided into four sections. The section following this introduction presents a brief description of Nigeria with emphasis on geographical landscape and the different ethnic groups; the second section discusses the conceptual framework and a review of related literature; the third section deals with methodological issues; while the fourth section examines the several vectors of culture within the Nigerian context, while the last section highlights the concluding aspect of the paper.

The Nation Called Nigeria

Nigeria is in West Africa, along the eastern coast of the gulf of guinea, and just north of the equator. It is bordered on the west by Benin, to the north by Niger and Chad, and to the east by Cameroun. It covers an area of 356,669 square miles (923,768 square kilometers), or about twice the size of California.

The country has the largest population of any African nation. In the 2006 census, the population was put at about 140 million. More than 374 ethnic groups call present day Nigeria home (Ekerete, 2001). Of these, the three dominant groups are the Hausa in the northern kingdoms of the savanna, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the south-east. In essence, Nigeria has three main environmental regions: savanna, tropical forests, and coastal wetlands. These environmental regions greatly affect the culture of the people who live there. The dry, open lands of the savanna make cereal farming and herding a way of life for the Hausa and the Fulani. The wet tropical forests to the south are good for farming fruits and vegetables-main income producers for the Yoruba, Igbo, and others in this area. The small ethnic groups living along the coast, such as the Ijaw and the Kalabari, are forced to keep their villages small due to lack of dry land. Living among creeks, lagoons, and salt marshes makes fishing and the salt trade part of everyday life in the area.

Even though most ethnic groups prefer to communicate in their own languages, English being the official language, is widely used for education, business transactions and for official purposes. However, although English remains the first language, it is more preponderant among the urban elites and is not spoken at all in some rural communities.

Many religions are followed in Nigeria since the constitution guarantees religious freedom. Christians are predominantly found in the southern parts of the country while Muslims live mostly in the north. Native religions in which people believe in deities, spirits and ancestor worship, are spread throughout the country.

Infrastructural facilities and availability of basic amenities is a major challenge in Nigeria. According to DFID (2006) Nigeria has the least road networks (195,000km) when compared to other oil producing nations like Indonesia and Mexico with 311,00km and 302,000km respectively. Furthermore, over 50% of the population lack access to safe drinking water; and only 40% of the population is literate with only about 35% of the population living in urban areas (Dandago, 2008). Quality of life in the rural areas is to say the least appalling because about 70% of the rural dwellers have no access to portable water, health care facilities or electricity, and other basic facilities that make life worthwhile (Amana, 1998 and Dandago, 2008). This situation has continued to put pressure on the urban centers as a result of mobility of the population from rural to urban areas in search of opportunities for economic advancement and access to the basic amenities of life (Okali *et al*, 2001 and Adesiji *et al*, 2009).

Culture and Consumer Buying Behaviour

We could argue that a growing child normally acquires a set of values, perceptions, preferences, and behaviours from his or her parents and family during his or her formative years and subsequently other social institutions in the larger society. In essence, it could be argued that the system of human behaviour and thought is not random but subject to certain standards. Consistent with this position, Hawkins *et al* (2004), submit that culture is acquired by man as a member of society. Over time, this now becomes the

code of conduct, which must be followed by each member of that society. Similarly, Krakauer *et al* (2002) hold the view that culture refers to more than merely ethnicity, but a constellation of shared meanings, values, rituals, and modes of interacting with others that determine how people view and make sense of the world. Furthermore, Tylor (1871) conceptualized culture as a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, moral, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. This is consistent with the position of Forsyth (2009) who sees cultural influences originating from nationality, religion, class and the circles the people mix in.

In most societies, there are certain beliefs and values that tend to persist because they are core, like: working, getting married, giving to charity, and being honest (Onu, 2000). These are passed on from parents to children and re-enforced by social institutions like schools, government and even mosques and churches.

There are perhaps more cultures in the world than there are nations, ethnic groups, or countries. However, one amazing thing about culture is that it always sounds strange or weird to someone who is not a part and parcel of it. This explains why for example, certain cultures would see monogamy as the norm, polygamy as unimaginable and perhaps polyandry as simply insanity. So, it means that our preference for one over another is more often than not guided or determined by the values we grew to learn rather than our personal preferences. This is because, as argued by Lee (1995), culture is governed by its own principles and not by raw intellect, and differences among people do not reflect differences in levels of intelligence. Most people would hold on dearly to their cultural heritage particularly those that are considered as core and for this reason, they are less likely to accept changes because they have become somewhat sacred. On the contrary, people are more disposed to changing values that are secondary. For example in Nigeria, getting married and having children are values that are core and as such people hold onto them very dearly. However, the age at which people should get married and the appropriate number of children to have are secondary values. Therefore, marketers are capable of altering secondary values and not core values (White, 1997; Mbah, 2000; Kotler and Keller 2009) in the sense that in Nigeria, early marriages can be discouraged and family planning encouraged as against discouraging people from getting married or having children.

Members of the same large culture could manifest different behaviours and preferences. This is because each culture contains smaller groups or subcultures which provide more specific identification or socialization for its members. In essence, a subculture is a segment of a larger culture characterized by a common set of traits according to nationality, religion, race, ethnicity, lifestyle or geographical location (Kotler, 2002). Although all cultures exist for the gratification of groups of people, they reveal a tremendous spectrum of diversity in what a society expects of its members. They are designed to satisfy biological as well as esteem and companionship needs (Ekerete, 2001). In line with this, Howard and Sheth (1969), posit that every individual's activities are directed by his or her own culture thereby shaping behavioural pattern which invariably influences or affects motives, brand comprehension, attitudes and intentions to use.

In marketing, cultural differences are becoming increasingly significant when targeting specific ethnic groups so as to ensure a "fit" between the product and those whom it was intended for. Since there are variations in needs and marketing opportunities, it follows that an understanding of a people's culture is important to marketers.

Consumers buy products primarily for the purpose of attaining a variety of needs satisfaction, which normally have to be consistent with their cultural values. For this reason, among others, marketers need to be familiar with the behaviour of consumers so as to better understand what buyers are really seeking in the purchase of their products. Consumer behaviour is more than just the physical purchase of products but rather covers a wide range of activities from the problem awareness stage through post-purchase behaviour. In essence, it is concerned with how individuals, and groups select, buy, use, dispose of goods, services,

ideas, or experiences to satisfy their needs and desires. It entails the study of people's needs, motivations, and thought processes used in choosing one product over another, and their patterns of purchasing different goods and services (White, 1997; Clemente, 1992; Wilson, 2000).

Customer patronage is something that organisations take seriously particularly in a competitive market, and that is why understanding the needs, aspirations, motives and desires of the customer is very fundamental. To achieve this, organisations seek to investigate what consumers' buy, why they buy, where they buy, how often they buy, and how often they use what they buy. However, it must be borne in mind that understanding motives of customers is not particularly easy because of two reasons; one is that people buy certain products without even knowing the reason for the purchase, and secondly people could buy, know why they buy and are not willing to talk about the reason or not comfortable to discuss same (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1999). In spite of these constraints, organisations strive to study and understand the motives of their various customers.

In trying to explain this rather complex aspect of human behaviour, a theory was advanced by Howard and Sheth (1969) for understanding the factors that usually influence purchase behaviour. They argue that consumer behaviour results from the 4p's of marketing (price, product, promotion and place) and environmental stimuli entering the buyers "black box" thereby producing certain responses. The challenge for marketers is to understand what actually happens in the buyers "black box" between the stimuli and response.

Methodology

The method adopted for this study is largely qualitative. Interviews were conducted to ascertain different aspects of the diverse cultural groups in Nigeria and how it shapes buying behaviour. The sample drawn, captured a cross section of Nigerians – some from the three major ethnic groups in the country, some with high level of western education, some not so educated, some that have been married for a long time, some recently married, some gainfully employed in the organized sector of the economy, some not in the organized sector. They were approached personally to seek their participation in the study. Finally, 26 people cutting across the different categories mentioned above were interviewed.

The interviews were conducted in an open-ended fashion after the interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interview. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed to avoid missing out vital contributions. While the interviews formed the primary source of data, there was occasional reliance on anecdotal sources as well as observed practices.

The Nigerian Experience

In Nigeria, there are different cultural groups across the country. The major groups are the Hausa, Yoruba and the Igbo ethnic groups. Braun *et al* (2001), argue that we would be wrong to assume that all attitudes of people subsumed under a monolithic label (in this case Nigeria) are the same. They believe we should always take into account more specific heritages and other cultural variables. Therefore, what is accepted in certain areas in Nigeria may be regarded as taboos or sacrilegious in some other parts of this same country. In essence, making sweeping generalizations about some aspects of the Nigerian culture would be near impossible.

Findings and Discussions

The findings emphasize eight different ways that culture affects behaviour and how the culture itself is experiencing changes due to dilution. While each ethnic group has certain constraints and obstacles that are unique to their peculiar circumstance, the eight factors described here affect and shape buying behaviour of all the groups in the study in some form or the other. They are (a) individualism and collectivism, (b) social

fabric, (c) family, (d) language, (e) religion, (f) stratification, (g) marriage, child bearing and death, (h) globalization and cultural dilution. Each is discussed in details next.

Individualism Vs Collectivism and Communality: Hofstede (1983), posits that Individualism or Collectivism refer to the extent to which someone values his or her interest versus group interest. Collectivists have stronger moral feelings towards mutual obligations and protection for each other regardless of contribution. In spite of the diversity characteristics inherent in the larger Nigerian cultural landscape, the people cherish collectivism over and above individualism. This drives people to want to protect each other regardless of individual contribution. People manifest geo-ethnic sentiments and the living pattern is more communal where extended family members are considered as being part and parcel of one's immediate family. This courtesy is also extended to neighbors where pleasantries are exchanged regularly and in the event of ceremonies neighbors are willing and eager to render assistance. This aspect of the Nigerian value system and culture drives buying behaviour because when someone travels and he or she is returning back home, it is expected that "gifts" would be brought back. More importantly, the purchases would be made for several others that make up the large family as against one's immediate family. Gift items or even food items would be brought back and shared amongst siblings, uncles, aunties, nephews, nieces, in-laws and even neighbors. According to one of the interviewees, 'This is the norm in northern Nigeria and doing the opposite would appear somewhat strange and unusual".

In fact what some western nations will consider a loose use of the word "brother" or "sister" – to cover people who do not share same parents - is seen as normal by most ethnic groups in Nigeria. Our finding is supported by the fact that in all local languages in Nigeria, words like "cousin", "niece", "nephew" are totally nonexistent. They are simply imports commonly used among the elites in the society when they mix English with their local language.

The Social Fabric: Generally, men have more freedom than women in Nigeria in the sense that the behaviour of men is less tightly controlled by others. So, it would appear that men are clearly the more powerful members of the society. It is believed that men are superior because of their role as "bread winners" and the fact that they are expected to stand up for their families in times of need. The women on the other hand, are seen as weak, frail and vulnerable. The value system is that of patriarchy - male dominance while, the norm is that women should be subordinate to men. The patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society is evident from the dominance of men in government, politics, and even executive positions in the private sector are reflective of this. Some occupations are seen as better suited for the feminine gender as against the masculine gender and vice versa regardless of the fact that Werth *et al* (2002) submit that gender is merely a psychological and sociological construction of the biological sex of a person.

This possibly explains why most of our interviewees from northern Nigeria noted that marketers of high involving products like cars, houses, investment products among others tend to focus more on male prospects rather than female. Impliedly, this flows from the mindset that women require men to make decisions and it is consistent with the position of Eddy and Burke (2004) who argue that masculinity stands for preference for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material success. In contrast, feminity stands for preference for relationships, modesty, quality of life, and caring for the weak.

In Nigeria, for the most part, the north, in households everyone tends to look at the man as the head of the family whose decisions are seldom open to challenge. The implication is that you find more of husband-dominant-family settings where purchase decisions are significantly influenced by men. Purchase of a home, automobile, electronics, investment in shares, clothing, computers and several other products or services would be decided upon by the man due to the patriarchal nature of the society. Of course, when it comes to baby food and wears as well as kitchen related equipment and utensils, the woman would often

decide since it is believed that this is in line with what feminity represents. It should be noted that who does the payment is not important because even where a woman has economic empowerment, tacit approval of the husband is sought before making certain purchases. On the whole, some of our interviewees argued that the experience in the southern part of Nigeria is slightly more liberal because of the prevalence of more syncratic family households. For the purpose of illustration, let us look at the issue of smoking. Tobacco smoking in Nigeria is considered hazardous to health and for this reason in the Consumer Protection Council Act (1992), manufacturers and marketers of tobacco are mandated to insert the cautionary note "The Federal Ministry of Health Warns that Tobacco Smoking is Dangerous to Health". In essence, it is a health hazard matter. However, our findings show that it is seen as the norm when a man smokes but very unsettling seeing a woman smoking. For this reason, you seldom see women smoking as freely as men do except those already perceived as deviants by the society. Consequently, women have to smoke in private since men have more freedom than women in our society in this context.

Family: The family constitutes the most influential primary reference group shaping a buyer's behaviour (Akanbi, 2002). We can distinguish between two families in someone's life; family of orientation and family of procreation (Kotler, 2002). On one hand, family of orientation is made up of parents. From parents a person acquires an orientation towards religion, politics, relationship with others, sense of personal ambition, self worth, love and so forth. Even if one no longer interacts with his or her parents, the influence on the unconscious behaviour can be significant. This continues to influence and shape the buying behaviour of someone courtesy of what was learnt from parents through ones formative years.

On the other hand, a more direct influence on everyday buying behaviour is one's family of procreation, namely, one's spouse and children. However, this influence for the most part, would be more pronounced as far as secondary values are concerned (Onu, 2000). The family is a very important consumer buying organization in the society and for this reason; marketers are interested in the roles and relative influence of the husband, wife and children and the purchase of large variety of products and services. It should be noted that in the case of Nigeria, ethnic groups show distinct variation of tasks by family members. Our interviewees asserted that in the north, more often than not, the husbands do most of the shopping because women are seen as frail and weak, and for this reason, they should not be exposed because they could be vulnerable. Although one of our interviewees said "I am a Professor of northern extraction with a very busy schedule, so I cannot be involved with daily shopping. My wife takes care of that". This suggests that highly educated people who are very busy in the north are more likely to be exception to what is preponderant. In the case of the south, the reverse is the case i.e. women do the shopping because it is seen as a very pedestrian exercise which the lesser sex should be preoccupied with.

Extended families are still the norm and are in fact the backbone of the social system. Grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers and in-laws all work as a unit through life. Family relationships are guided by hierarchy and seniority, and social standing is largely achieved through extended families. It is very normal for an individual to turn to family members for financial assistance when he or she is passing through difficulties. Even though, the role of the extended family is gradually diminishing among the elites in the urban areas, a strong tradition of mutual care and responsibility among members still remains. For this reason, the business of nursing homes and the likes are rare if not totally non existent. Our findings confirm that it will be considered an insult and a source of mockery to a family that decides to send its old parent(s) to a nursing home due to advancement in age. On the contrary it is seen as a privilege to have old parents and cater for them up till their dying days. The reason being that in the Nigerian value system, parents bring up their children and put them through school and would continue to be responsible for them until they are able to become independent (regardless of age). So, it would sound very strange hearing that someone gave

a loan to his father. In the words of one interviewee "What is wrong with reciprocating all the kind gestures extended to you when you were an infant and helpless?"

Language: Every form of culture is identified in terms of language (Umoren, 1996). In short every language serves as a vehicle of the culture of the people who speak it. In Nigeria, there are 374 ethnic languages and groups (Ekerete, 2001). Some languages are found in more than one state and it is also not uncommon to find people who are bi-lingual or even multi-lingual. These languages tend to affect the behaviour of consumers in terms of product or service acceptance. For this reason, marketers in Nigeria have cultivated the habit of using regional advertising which makes the use of the local language in that particular targeted area possible. For example in Northern Nigeria, the dominant language is Hausa and is frequently used for commercials by Freedom Radio (based in Kano, Nigeria). Similarly, advertising agencies use local languages for outdoor advertorials like billboards (see appendix I and II) because there is a deeply-rooted believe that the potential customers would be more receptive to such persuasive messages. One respondent said "I feel very much at home when advertorials are done in Hausa and it aids my connection with the product or service being advertised".

Religion: Plays a major role in shaping buying patterns of people. There are three main religions in Nigeria; Islam, Christianity and Traditional religion. Islam dominates in northern Nigeria while Christianity is predominant in the south. Religion affects consumption behaviour and shapes preferences for clothes, food, beverages and protein. The Islamic faith does not permit the consumption of alcoholic beverages and pork meat. For this reason, these products are not officially allowed in the northern states (where the sharia legal system operates), but are sold illegally. The crucial point to note is that even where people who belong to the Islamic faith choose to drink alcohol, they are unable to do so publicly due to the value system. However, in the southern parts of Nigeria, alcohol is freely sold and consumed without any restrictions or inhibitions. It should be noted that issues considered as core values in religion are very sensitive in Nigeria and followers are willing to amend certain purchase preferences when such values are perceived as having been tampered with. For instance, in 2007 there was an alleged newspaper publication which claimed that Mr. Biggs (a subsidiary of UAC Foods) was using pork for their fried rice and meat pie. Although, this claim was hardly verified, it negatively affected the market share of the company until they had to educate consumers about the illogical nature of the allegation.

Stratification: Every society is characterized by stratification where classes emanate and people that belong to the same social class tend to behave alike and distinct from those that do not. This according to Kotler (2002) results in inferior and superior feeling among people, which implies that as they move up or down the ladder, their purchase behaviour will be reshaped by this force. The high class in Nigeria is mainly made up of wealthy politicians, businessmen, and some of the educated elites. These people, however, make up a very small fraction of the population.

Wealth is the main symbol of social stratification in modern Nigeria, especially in urban areas. While in the past many ethnic groups held hereditary titles and traditional roles, money has become the new maker of power and social status. According to one of our interviewees, members of wealthy elite class are easily identifiable by their appetite for expensive and flashy cars, high quality textile and fancy clothes, designer perfumes, jewelry and mansions that are mostly western-styled. This is consistent with the position of Assad (2007) who argued that, at the individual level, it is believed that becoming modern is assumed to be related to the acquisition and consumption of certain status goods and a preference for the western lifestyle. Furthermore, one of our respondents said "If I am rich, I will make sure that all my children school abroad because it will help communicate my high social class in the society".

Marriage, Child bearing and Death: Marriage and child bearing, for the most part, are seen as core values in the Nigerian culture save in cases of celibacy (in the Christian religion for nuns and priests). The significance of child bearing in the Nigerian culture could be argued to be partly responsible for the slow acceptance of family planning as a product. It is the norm to have people (family, neighbors, colleagues, friends and well wishers) buy gift items for a new born baby and the mother when they are visiting to congratulate and rejoice with the couple. Mostly, baby clothes, diapers, napkins among other things are bought. In Kano-Nigeria, there are several shops (that sell such baby products) located very close to the two major hospitals that handle maternity cases.

Marriages are normally characterized by heavy festivities which include; traditional dances, drinking and eating. The exact nature of the ceremonies would however be modified by religious beliefs. Islamic wedding ceremonies mostly found in the north are devoid of alcohol but cola nuts, candies, pastries and various traditional meals are served. In the southern parts of Nigeria where predominantly people belong to the Christian faith, there is demand for wedding gowns, alcohol is served, cola nuts are also shared together with different meals.

Death is seen as an inevitable end but treated differently based on religion and other cultural variables. In the north (among the Muslims) where the Islamic faith is more prevalent, in the event of death, the deceased is buried immediately in simple white cloth with very quiet mourning and prayers are offered. The bereaved would normally sit outside on mats waiting for people to come and condole them. Members of extended family, friends and well wishers would bring food for the purpose of feeding the bereaved as well as those that come for condolence. In the south it is very different. The deceased is not normally buried hurriedly so as to give time for adequate arrangements. The burial ceremony (particularly for adults) is very elaborate with professional mourners hired to cry and handle the corpse which is normally put and buried in a casket. There is usually a lot of food and alcoholic beverages provided by the bereaved for all those who come for condolence.

Globalization and Cultural Dilution: Jolibert and Baumgartner (1997), argue that individual values do not exist in isolation but are embedded within a value hierarchy. For this reason, an individual is compelled to continually compare the relative importance of the values in his or her value hierarchy. This continued comparison of relative importance is what makes human values vulnerable to change. Globalization is largely thought of as an economic process characterized by cross-border interactions of the flow of goods and services, finance and international trade (Singh, 2005). However, Prasad and Prasad (2006), view it as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which encompass not just economic elements but also cultural, ideological, demographic and similar other aspects. In Nigeria, there has been a slow but steady cultural dilution which is partly attributable to increasing access to western form of education, availability of cable television and the internet. Given that television is one of the major vectors of cultural globalization (Prasad and Prasad, 2007), advertising has been one of the fastest-growing industries, and has exploded in developing countries (Durning, 1992). Also due to rising income, education, and the issue of women's liberation, we can notice a gradual shift from the husband-dominant-family setting to the syncratic setting. Naturally, all these developments are helping to gradually reshape preferences. However, it is important to note that such changes are mostly as it relates to secondary values rather than core or primary values. In recent times, there is increasing awareness on the need to stay healthy so more fitness clubs and recreation centers are found in the urban areas now.

Conclusion

Every society has its set of values, norms, beliefs, attitudes and culture which are developed over time and handed down from one generation to the other and become its code of conduct. Nigerians attach

importance to culture, tradition and religion but their behaviour can not be subsumed under a monolithic label because of variations in specific heritages due to "diversity" characteristics. The buying behaviour of Nigerians is greatly shaped and influenced by collectivism, patriarchy, family, language, class stratification and religion. The Nigerian experience supports the position of Krakauer *et al* (2002), who argue that culture permeates our existence, touching every aspect of our lives individually and collectively. Finally, although the Nigerian culture is experiencing a gradual dilution due to globalization, this is only to the extent of values that are basically secondary.

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Appendix I

"Kwanciya Cikin Nutsuwa, Mafarki Mai Dadi " in Hausa means Composed, Comfortable Sleep, Sweet Dreams

Appendix II

"*I*