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Local reception of global media texts: Telenovelas as sites of cultural mixture in Ghana

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Abstract

Telenovelas have had phenomenal success as global media texts, but their continuous export to Africa has significant cultural implications. Using hybridity theory and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of audience reception, this paper assessed the extent to which *Simply Maria*, an 'indigenised' telenovela of Mexican origin, influenced the local identity of Ghanaian viewers and the mechanisms through which this occurred. Interviews with regular viewers revealed that the telenovela shaped views about personal identity. This occurred through internalisation, value-based evaluations and identification with characters. Viewers decoded the telenovela from a negotiated position, a development which calmed the homogenising currents of globalisation feared by cultural theorists.

Keywords: telenovela, cultural globalisation, indigenisation, television landscape in Ghana, hybridity.

Introduction

The globalisation of culture often connotes the internationalisation of mass media. Inevitably, understanding the dynamic response of local cultures to global influence has preoccupied anthropologists (Stewart, 1999), communication scholars (Abubakar, 2013) and other social science researchers over

the past few decades. Not only does this demonstrate heightened interest in globalisation, it also testifies that globalisation is a matter of concern for various disciplines.

This paper interrogates the sociocultural impact of media globalisation in Ghana by examining the extent and mechanisms through which telenovelas may influence the cultural identities of audiences. The paper is organised into thematic sections that explore the imperatives of cultural globalisation, television globalisation and local reception of telenovela as global texts. The theoretical underpinning, methodology and findings of the research are further discussed in the rest of paper, leading to conclusions being drawn.

Supported by satellites, the Internet and other contemporary media technologies, media texts (images, videos, audios) flow steadily across national borders and connect audiences worldwide (Kraidy, 2002). Such global media texts present important cultural encounters in local communities. Often, it is feared that these encounters will leave local cultures corrupted, adulterated and unauthentic through a process of cultural imperialism (Morley, 1992). On the contrary, other scholars (Massey, 1992; Tomlinson, 2012) argue that this is not the case, as some elements of local identities have their basis in material and symbolic resources which are not necessarily local but are still authentic because places and cultures are no longer bound to be homogenous.

Notwithstanding, global media texts shape local culture, although the nature and extent of influence cannot be predetermined for all local areas (Kaul, 2012). The influence of television on cultural values and identities in particular is well documented (Chalaby, 2016; Morales & Simelio, 2015; D'Silva, 2000). However, following the commoditisation of television viewing and the concomitant shift in media business models, Morley (1992, p. 207) argues that the public provision of information, education and entertainment translates 'into a "regime of value" determined by the cash nexus', thereby rendering television's contributions to public culture divisive.

Additionally, contrary to cultural proximity postulations, domestically produced television content has not triumphed over

foreign media content in many parts of Africa. Unlike in Europe and Latin-America where longitudinal studies in individual countries have revealed that audiences have strong affinity to local and regional productions (Ksiazek & Webster 2008), the situation in Africa is different. Media audience in Africa largely prefer foreign (Western) content and local producers are shaping media output according to audience preference (Endong, 2014; Haynes, 2011). The reverse scenario is also possible as audience preference for foreign content can and may be the result of media producers' priming of such content.

In Ghana, the television landscape has evolved rapidly from the handful of analogue free-to-air stations in the 1990s to the current situation of ninety three (93) authorised television stations, with majority being satellite broadcasting free-to-air (NCA, 2017). TV services in Ghana may be transmitted over cable, terrestrial wireless or satellite platforms. Migration from analogue to digital broadcast also commenced in Ghana in 2016. These developments have occasioned and continue to fuel intense competition among television stations for audience attention and corresponding advertising revenue. In response, many television stations in Ghana have resorted to the importation of foreign media content in a bid to boost viewership and ratings.

Many television stations in Ghana have turned to the telenovela, a genre of long-form melodrama, to attract and retain viewers. Although this is not an entirely new practice, the primetime broadcast of telenovela by television stations in Ghana has soared in recent years (Adia, 2014), and for the first time (July 2016 to April 2017) in Ghana, a Mexican telenovela was broadcast in an indigenous Ghanaian language, Twi¹. Originating from Latin America, telenovelas have known phenomenal success as global media texts as they are consumed in more than one hundred and thirty (130) countries around the world (Acosta-Alzuru, 2010). This long-form melodrama is also well-accepted in many of these countries. The success of the telenovela is due in part to its

1 The indigenous language of the Akan people in Ghana. It is the most commonly used local language in Ghana.

melodramatic nature and emotive content. Additionally, telenovela has become a social movement and catalyst of social change which has been successfully adopted for behaviour change communication for development projects in parts of Africa and Asia (Tufté, 2003).

As television genre, the telenovela is distinctive for its strong ties to the culture and society of its country of production (Havens, 2004). Inadvertently, categories of telenovela audience (women) fond of these global media products, imitate the clothing and hairstyle shown in these long-form melodramas (Touré, 2007). Similarly, sections of viewers also adopt new relationships and family values from telenovelas (Werner, 2006). The appropriation of telenovelas by audience has immense potential for influencing behaviour as they become part of everyday life for many people (Adia, 2014).

It is apparent from the burgeoning discourse that the telenovela continues to receive scholarly attention as an important global media product with the capability to influence aspects of local identities. However, whilst its popularity and connection to globalisation are well known, the reception of telenovela in local areas is less uniform and sparsely researched, especially in Ghana. Additionally, earlier works (Adia, 2014; Touré, 2007; Wener, 2006) show that telenovela influence African cultural identities in ways that are yet to be fully appreciated. Further, not much is known about audience reception of locally formatted telenovela in Ghana as this is still an emerging trend. In consequence of the dearth of research in this field, the current paper focuses on the extent to which telenovela viewing affects the cultural identify of sections of Mexican telenovela viewers in Ghana. In connection to this primary interest, this paper further explores the mechanisms through which the influence occurs.

This study is relevant because as the production and consumption formats of telenovela evolve, new studies are necessary to understand local audience reception of such global texts. Of primary significance to this study is the understanding of how individual media consumers incorporate global media content into their personal lives. Additionally, whilst it maybe be

inconclusive to accuse global media texts as unfairly mixing with pristine local culture, it is important to understand how such texts shape audience's identities as forces of globalisation.

Television globalisation

The meaning of the word 'globalisation' is elusive, argues Hamelink (2012), as it means different things, at different levels to different kinds of people. However, it may be generally described as the processes through which more people across distant areas become connected in more and different ways. The nature of this connection can be as simple as doing or experiencing the same sort of thing (Lechner & Boli, 2012). Globalisation is also viewed in part as a social consequence of technological progress and internationalisation of media (Kraidy, 2002; Ambirajan, 2000). Consequently, television and film have gained notoriety as powerful media forms and forces of globalisation (Woodward, 2001).

Broadcast television and movies have since the 1960s allowed viewers in different countries to enjoy the same programmes but this has intensified with globalisation and we can now speak of a global television industry which is a mosaic of international production and distribution networks with the content value chain at its core (Chalaby, 2016). This trend became distinct mainly in the 1990s when a gamut of factors including rising industrial complexity, deregulation measures, economic growth and trade liberalisation made it a profitable and acceptable strategy for media organisations to search for television content from international sources (Chalaby, 2016). New technology and consumer demand and preferences also progressively led media firms to concentrate on those activities that helped them retain a competitive advantage, thus further contributing to the globalisation of television content (Chalaby, 2016). Alongside this development, according to Tomlinson (2012), is the 'indigenisation' of many television genres and formats, notably the Brazilian soap opera and the Mexican telenovela which have undeniably increased the extent to which people's everyday lives are experienced through the media across the globe.

The globalisation of television has created a situation where major corporations are trading across national borders and establishing a homogenous culture of consumption (Kaul, 2012). This raises concerns about the influence of global media in local areas and the priorities of those who control and direct global media output or products. Following from this, the television appears to have lost its place as site for the construction of national community (Turner, 2001). Instead, it is perceived as a medium for westernisation in many countries in Africa including Ghana.

Cultural globalisation

Despite being a well-researched concept, there is no one generally accepted definition of culture. However, the understanding of culture has evolved over the years and a contemporary definition of the concept will be the shorthand description of Hofstede (1991, p. 5) that ‘Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.’ Individuals and groups with a common culture also share the same beliefs, morals, knowledge, custom and values. The distinctive cultural elements or characteristics of individuals and groups form their cultural identity (Kaul, 2012). Cultural identity, according to Kaul (2012), is a sense of self that individuals derive from their formal or informal membership in groups that transfer and inculcate knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, values, traditions and ways of life. Cultural identities are relatively stable but may change overtime, a situation which evokes emotion for many local people because of the concomitant loss of heritage. Changes in cultural identity are interlaced with privilege and power and are negotiated through communication.

To a large extent, cultural globalisation is seen as a corollary to the globalisation of media because the mass media has become the purveyor of global information (Movius, 2010). The consequences of globalisation, however, span cultural interactions and may disrupt stable identity structures at personal, national and global levels (Magu, 2015). Crane (2011, p.1) defines cultural globalisation as the ‘cross-border flows of national and transnational

cultures.’ However, rarely do cultural phenomena that flow across borders incorporate all nations of the world or all continents. This is due, in part, to large diversities in national cultures and also, in part, to the imbalances in terms of power, wealth and resources for disseminating and appropriating cultural products (Crane, 2011).

Globalisation of culture suggests an increasing integration of nations in the world system following the evolution of modern transportation means, economic ties, the formation of multinational corporations and the prevailing global market conditions (Raikhan, Moldakhmet, Ryskeldy & Alua, 2014). Investigating the interaction between culture and globalisation in a modern world, Raikhan et al. (2014) point to the perpetuation of cultural identity loss as a consequence of cultural globalisation. In other words, local areas are becoming inundated with international culture, a situation that may douse the latter through assimilation, absorption and dissolution.

At present, fuelled by the ever-increasing intensification in the global flow of media products, strong currents of globalisation exert a homogenising influence on local culture. Accordingly, concerns about loss of unique local cultures, and a concomitant loss of identity, exclusion and even social conflict are rife. However, local responses to global media texts vary and may involve straddling distinct cultures and negotiation of cultural differences which lead to cultural hybridity - a cultural action that accommodates in-betweens (Kraidy, 2002).

Hybridity is essentially a form of adaptation to foreign culture (Ishak, 2011). It is a common theme in post-colonial discourse which explains cultural mixture and critiques cultural imperialism (Kraidy, 2002). Meanwhile, there is the tendency to either celebrate cultural hybridity as emancipatory or condemn it as ambivalent because the hybrid is neither entirely new nor original (Burke, 2009).

Local reception of telenovelas

The telenovela is a television genre literally meaning ‘television-novel’. Telenovelas have become global media texts

because of the scale of their presence in different countries and different languages around the world (Acosta-Alzuru, 2010), but also because of the interdependence in the telenovela value chain (production, transportation and marketing) which involves corporations interacting across borders (Chalaby, 2016). The globalisation of television has affected the distinct flavour of Latin-American telenovela, as the genre is repackaged and transformed in order for it to serve multiple and diverse audiences in different settings. Havens (2004) notes that in pursuit of foreign revenues which have come to represent the lion share of telenovela sales, Latin American producers have sought to open up new markets and to develop co-production and formatting arrangements including the remake of telenovelas with local actors. This reflects the integration of cultural and economic activities on a global scale (Baltruschat, 2002).

Audience experiences with global media are not even as globalisation itself is occurring simultaneously across the world but with different consequences. Accordingly, researchers continue to examine closely audiences' experiences with global media. An analysis of the consumption pattern of telenovelas shows that these global media texts facilitate identity construction (Morales & Simelio, 2015; Adia, 2014). Global media changes local identities in dynamic ways by altering the symbolic environment subtly through television (D'Silva, 2000).

As ideological re-presentations, media texts are borne of culture. Hence, the broadcast of foreign media texts in local areas may obfuscate local experiences, knowledge and tradition. Whilst this is true, Tomlinson, (2012) and Magu (2015) aver that local cultures are not necessarily victims of globalisation because cultures can also adopt and integrate globalisation's attractions. However, much remains to be known about this resilience of local cultures as globalisation intensifies.

The telenovela in Ghana

Ghana is a West African nation located on the Gulf of Guinea. The country has a liberal, diverse and vibrant media

landscape. Telenovela is a popular television genre in Ghana (Adia, 2014). Emerging in the 1990s and initially shown by only a few private television stations, telenovela has, with time, become part of the regular television content for nearly all major television stations in Ghana. Currently there is competition for telenovela viewership and this is driving innovation among local television stations.

In response to the competition, some television stations in Ghana have sought to indigenise Latin American telenovelas by formatting the broadcast language into a local Ghanaian language (Akan/Twi) and instituting studio discussions of issues raised in the telenovela after each episode. Indigenisation is a Third World philosophy or concept which is reflected and sometimes institutionalised in sensitive sectors (education, law, media, economy) of the Global South to upset cultural imperialism. Indigenisation of media products is complex and elusive to define because a program can be produced locally but with foreign format or ideas (Endong, 2015). As a result, indigenisation of media products is a divisive issue. Nevertheless, its capacity to combat cultural imperialism is not in doubt. Endong (2015, p. 110) notes, ‘indigenisation may be viewed as a form of cultural rigidity or purism but the idea that culture is bound to change discredits its cultural protectionist claims.’

Much of the contestation about media indigenisation could be avoided if it were seen as a transformative process of making foreign media products native. This process is similar to *glocalisation* (mixture of global and local), but while *glocalisation* strives for balance and inclusiveness, indigenisation seeks to transform and domesticate. Changing the original Spanish language of *Simply Maria* (*Simplemente Maria*) into an indigenous language gives the telenovela an indigenous touch, but this does not necessarily make the end product indigenous, hence the operative term ‘indigenised’ telenovela.

The local language scene in Ghana is diverse with various ethnicities laying claim to different indigenous languages. Twi, an indigenous dialect of the Akan ethnic group, is the most spoken among the 42 to 55 local languages in Ghana (Dako, 2002). Prior to

the broadcast of *Simply Maria* in Twi, Latin-American telenovelas in Ghana were broadcast in English, the country's official language, and incidentally the language of Ghana's former colonial master. Consequently, English is the main language for broadcasting in Ghana, particularly television broadcasting although some television stations broadcast some programmes in indigenous Ghanaian languages.

The promotional strategies for the telenovela in Ghana are equally innovative as these include open air viewing (amphitheatre style), radio promotions and street floats. These Latin-American productions are broadcast at primetime (usually from 8: pm to 9: pm local time). The productions span many months with about three hundred episodes, each episode lasting from 45 to 60 minutes. Whilst there is no gainsaying that telenovelas are attractive global media products, the manner in which these foreign cultural products have been appropriated and promoted by local television producers contributes to the popularity of the genre among television viewers in Ghana.

Theory

Hybridity theory

Hybridity theory, according to Kraidy (2002), is a productive theoretical orientation for communication and media studies in the attempt to deconstruct the complicated subtleties of cultural globalisation. Hybridity theory is a post-colonial theory marked by a sense of 'double consciousness and 'in-betweenness' regarding how local cultures react to foreign influence. Hybridity theory was posited by Homi K. Bhabha to describe the subversion of single, purist notions of identity, in favour of multiple cultural positions. Bhabha explains hybridity as a 'third space' emerging from the synthesis of cultural differences (Alexander & Sharma, 2013).

Hybridity is often associated with related concepts such as creolisation and syncretism; all these concepts are commonly used in the domain of cultural mixture and they denote the dynamics of global social developments (Stewart, 1999). Hybridity theory focuses on modes of media production and creativity, economic

and political aspects of culture, and the meaning of values. As such, it relies on global cultures, nations, cities, communities and individuals as units of analysis (Crane, 2011).

Hybridity is a historical feature of adaptive living cultures all over the world (Appiah, 2006). In Africa, hybrid identity has become a 'deep ambivalence towards global popular culture' (Strelitz & Boshoff, 2008, p. 237). Large multinational media companies employ the concept of hybridisation and adaptation to attract diverse audiences in different countries rather than simply marketing homogeneous cultural units worldwide. Critics argue that hybridity still contributes to hegemony by encouraging the reproduction and maintenance of a new world order (Crane, 2011). This implies that hybridity serves both a political and economic agenda.

Studies that have used hybridity theory to explain the intersection of globalisation and cultural mixture include Gomarasca (2013), Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk (2005) and Kraidy (2002). Using hybridity theory for this study provides an opportunity to demonstrate particularities of Ghanaian television audiences' receptiveness to the cultural influences of locally formatted or indigenised Mexican telenovela.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model

Audience reception studies are concerned with how audiences negotiate meaning differently in specific cultural contexts, and the encoding/decoding model is a significant contribution to the understanding of this process (Castleberry, 2016; Movius, 2010). The encoding/decoding model was developed by Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist. Hall avers that whilst communication essentially occurs through a process of encoding by a sender and decoding by a receiver (encoding/decoding model), encoded meanings can be decoded to mean something different from the sender's intent (Hall, 1993).

Stuart Hall identified three different positions or codes that may be used by audiences (receivers) when decoding meanings

within cultural texts, particularly televisual. These are; dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated position and oppositional position (Hall, 1993). Hall's main purpose for putting forward the different positions is to explain the influence of power and domination in the communication process (Castleberry, 2016).

At the dominant-hegemonic position, receivers associate with the sender's preferred point of view. This is called dominant-hegemonic position precisely because the codes used are in dominance (global). Dominant/preferred reading occurs when the sender and receiver operate with the same assumptions, rule set and cultural biases because their frame of meaning can be located very close to each other. It is at this position of decoding that the transmission of cultural ideas to viewers' minds may occur (Hall, 1993). The negotiated position is when viewers decode the televised messages within the context of the dominant cultural and societal views. At this position, messages are interpreted in a sense different from the dominant reading or the hegemonic position. Viewers in the negotiated position may not necessarily decode messages within the hegemonic frame of meaning but are familiar enough with the social context to be able to sufficiently decode cultural texts in an abstract sense.

Lastly, oppositional reading is when viewers decode televisual or messages in the manner that it was purported to be decoded, but rather based on the viewers' personal or societal beliefs, viewers may identify another, unintended meaning within the message. This last position is contrary to the global or dominant reading, hence its oppositional nature (Hall, 1993).

The encoding/decoding model shows that audiences are active and reception is associated with differentiated interpretation. This theory has been variously used to explore audience reception (Livingstone & Ranjana, 2013), globalisation of culture (Lizardo, 2006) and cross-cultural influences of media content (Biltereyst, 2002). Schroder (2000) criticizes the encoding and decoding model of audience reception as unidimensional and overly focused on ideology. However, as audiences in western and non-western

contexts employ different patterns of interpretation and demonstrate dissimilarities in media use when encountering western media products (Movius, 2010), the encoding/decoding model is suitable for explaining the active role of television viewers within the wider circuit of cultural encounter.

Bhabha's hybridity theory and Hall's encoding/decoding model constitute the theoretical underpinning of this study. Hybridity theory conveys the ambivalence associated with the adaptation of global cultural products such as the television in local contexts. The encoding/decoding model, on the other hand, explains how media audience are active and reception is associated with differentiated interpretation. Hybridity theory and the encoding/decoding model complement each other in this paper. For, hybridity theory focuses on the text (*Simply Maria*) whereas the encoding/decoding model is centred on audience reception. Together, these two theories present a suitable framework for interrogating both the mechanisms and extent of the homogenising influence of indigenised telenovela on television audience.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted for the study and a single case study design was used. This approach and design are suitable for studies in communication and culture (Lyndloff & Taylor, 2002). Madina, an urban suburb of Accra located in the south-eastern part of Ghana and in the Greater Accra Region, was selected as the study site. Madina was a suitable study site because it is an urban settlement with significant demographic diversity. Using interviews and focus group discussion, data was obtained from residents of Madina who watched *Simply Maria* (*Simplemente Maria*).

Sample adequacy is still a divisive issue in qualitative research. Sandelwoski (1995) avers it ultimately comes down to researchers' judgment and experience in assessing the quality of the information obtained against the uses to which it will be put. This study involved twenty-five (25) respondents identified using the snowball sampling strategy. The sample size for this study is

justifiable as it is sufficient to guarantee thick, rich data but also theoretical and data saturation as Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) suggested.

Snowball sampling strategy was suitable because it helped the researchers to locate more viewers of *Simply Maria* by relying on a network of previously identified viewers. This sampling strategy involved the identification of an initial respondent and then the involvement of other respondents based on referrals from previously identified respondents. The first respondent was found watching television in a hair dressing saloon at the study site. This subject was selected after preliminary interrogations had revealed that the subject was interested in telenovelas and had been a regular viewer of *Simply Maria*.

The final sample consisted of 18 female respondents and 7 males. The domination of females in the sample is characteristic of telenovela research (Morales & Simelio, 2015; Adia, 2014; Touré, 2007; Werner, 2006) as females tend to enjoy this melodrama genre more than males. Majority of respondents were young, had basic formal education and were predominantly engaged in the informal sector. A focus group discussion of 9 respondents, and 16 in-depth face-to-face interviews were used for data collection from April to June 2017.

Simply Maria is a remake of a 1989 telenovela with the same title. The modern version was produced for Televisa (in Mexico) and premiered in Spanish in 2016. In Ghana, *Simply Maria* is the first Mexican telenovela to be broadcast in a local language. The Mexican telenovela was formatted in Twi, the most widely spoken local language in Ghana, thus adding another dimension to the domestication of telenovela in Ghana. *Simply Maria* was aired for one hour (8 pm to 9 pm) for ten months (July 2016 to April 2017) on United Television (UTV). UTV is a commercial television broadcaster owned and operated by U 2 Company Limited. The station has nationwide coverage and is accessible in both analogue and digital terrestrial free-to-air television every minute of the day (24/7). *Simply Maria* was shown three days a week (from Friday to Sunday) with repeat broadcast on Tuesday, Wednesday and

Friday at 4 pm local time each day. Each episode of *Simply Maria* on UTV was immediately followed with a studio discussion of the main theme and issues emerging out of that particular episode. The telenovela was also promoted on radio, social media (Facebook, YouTube) and on the streets of some major towns in Ghana. The hype and subsequent popularity of *Simply Maria* make it a suitable case for investigating audience reaction to global texts in Ghana.

Findings and discussions

Extent of influence

Telenovelas by themselves are appealing because of their melodramatic nature, but the local language formatting, studio discussion and intense promotion of *Simply Maria* drew more people to participate in this vogue culture. Through the thematic analysis by the focus group and in-depth interview responses, it was realised that watching *Simply Maria* influenced the cultural identity of viewers. *Simply Maria*, as a product of popular culture, shaped the views of audiences about cultural values. However, the broadcast of *Simply Maria* in Twi made it a hybrid text, and transformed the genre from a distinctively Latin-American and global product into a mixed text comprising Ghanaian (language) and Latin-American (setting, cast and storyline) cultural elements. This mixing is a form of cultural adaptation (Appiah, 2006) which is creative but leads to ambivalence towards global culture (Strelitz & Boshoff, 2008), characteristic of hybridity.

Nevertheless, *Simply Maria* had cult following. Responses revealed that relatives and friends in different areas of Ghana could hold telephone discussions to catch up on episodes when they missed the broadcast schedule. Some parents even encouraged their young adult children to join the watch party because of the embedded social messages in the telenovela.

One interviewed respondent indicated:

I watched it with all my children and we had our own discussions afterwards. I have a sister in Kumasi [a major

city in Ghana]. Sometimes, I call her to narrate and discuss episodes with her if she missed one due to power cut or some other reason (Verbatim interview response).

The study also revealed that representations of social and personal issues such as class discrimination, self-determination and patience as shown in *Simply Maria*, shaped viewers' personal views about challenges faced in their personal lives. This outcome of the study is consistent with the observation of D'Silva (2000) that global media influences local identities in dynamic ways. One respondent who had no formal education and worked as a hairdresser stated that she no longer saw her lack of formal education as an impediment because Maria (main character in *Simply Maria*) became a successful fashion designer without classroom education. The respondent further indicated that the actions of Maria have motivated her to start schooling.

She added that:

Maria was determined to learn tailoring and go to school afterwards. I have also taken to that. Look [pointing at textbook]; that is my book. I have started going to school (Verbatim interview response).

Another respondent contemplating ending a romantic relationship also indicated that he was motivated to stay in the relationship because the tables might turn and circumstances could improve as it happened for Alejandro and Maria in *Simply Maria*.

I wanted to stop dating my girlfriend for some time. I was thinking that she was not serious, but latter [after watching *Simply Maria*], I realised that it was just a little misunderstanding so I have decided to continue with the relationship (Verbatim interview response).

The extent to which *Simply Maria* influences local cultural identities is manifested in how the telenovela, as a form of popular culture, shapes the views of the audience. Although *Simply Maria*

is not the only telenovela or global media text which audiences are exposed to, the cultural influence of *Simply Maria* is deep and it may lead viewers to cultivate new attitudes, beliefs, values and ways of life. Although, personal identity is the part of culture most influenced by the telenovela, the spread of culture through television could destabilise national and global level identities structures as well (Magu, 2015).

Additionally, audience reception of the text (*Simply Maria*) was differentiated as posited by Stuart Hall under the encoding/decoding model. This study found that audience's reception of the mixed cultural encounter in *Simply Maria* was mainly from a negotiated position and this has implications for the appropriation of cultural values embedded in the text. Also, while confirming earlier studies (Morales & Simelio, 2015; Adia, 2014) that demonstrated that global media texts facilitate identity construction among audiences, the current study shows that the influence of telenovela on cultural identity is strong and most evident at the personal level. It is, however, possible for the influence to move to the community and national levels owing to the cult following enjoyed by *Simply Maria* and the domestic conversations that ensued among viewers. Additionally, the scope of influence may be due to the plot and unambiguous end of *Simply Maria*. The telenovela has a climax and definitive end that ensure that the stories close after a number of episodes and several months of viewing. In the case of *Simply Maria* in Ghana, the broadcasters of the telenovela began the promotion of a new telenovela with a different focus almost immediately after *Simply Maria* had been brought to total closure.

The mechanisms through which the influence occur

The cultural identities of viewers of *Simply Maria* were found to be influenced through identification with characters, value judgement of representations and internalisation of desirable behaviour presented in the telenovela. The processes identified are neither mutually exclusive nor sequential. Regarding identification, viewers of *Simply Maria* readily associated with characters, their roles and the circumstances they faced in the telenovela owing

partly to the ‘indigenisation’ of the telenovela. Further, rural life, relocation and adjustment of migrants in cities, jealousy and faith in God as shown in the telenovela are already familiar issues in Ghanaian society. The translators of the telenovela also used the names of local market centres and bus stations, jargons and folk songs which brought the context and content of *Simply Maria* still closer to local viewers. Commenting on this, one respondent said;

I have not been to school, but I understand when you speak English to me. I can even give some response. But you know their [telenovela characters] English is heavy, it has slangs and all that, so the Twi translations made me really understand and enjoy it [*Simply Maria*] (Verbatim interview response).

In addition, viewers used Ghanaian culture as touch stone to make value judgments about the conduct, intention and actions of characters in *Simply Maria*.

Maria had a child with Alejandro, but the family of Alejandro did not like Maria just because she was from a poor background. It happens (Verbatim interview response).

Another respondent stated that:

It [the telenovela] shows how women preparing for marriage should conduct themselves, such as how to live with difficult sisters in law, the temptations, trials, and tribulations are there (Verbatim interview response).

The verbatim response is evidence of how viewers compare the conduct of characters on screen with real life situations in Ghanaian society. Respondents even described a protagonist in the telenovela, Vanesa, as ‘evil’ and possessed by witchcraft because she was mean to Maria. During post-broadcast discussions, acts of characters such as infidelity, lying and betrayal were also variously condemned as immoral. That is another demonstration of how

viewers engage in a process of comparing what happens on the screen with their own social reality and judged the characters mostly based on Ghanaian cultural standards and personal principles.

Another important process which extended the influence of telenovela on personal identity is the internalisation of behaviour and attitudes shown in the telenovela. Many viewers identified with and, drew lessons from, the conduct of Maria, Pablo and Alejandro in the telenovela.

A respondent quipped,

I learnt to be patient from *Simply Maria* because Maria was patient on many occasions. Pablo also liked to listen too often to everyone, but I will not do that. I will go with what I know in my heart is right for me. So patience and following my heart are what I have learnt from this (Verbatim interview response).

Some viewers, however, took exception to the conduct of Maria in some circumstances. One respondent remarked,

Maria made a lot of mistakes. Often, she could speak up and say ‘gentleman I don’t like what you are doing to me’ but instead she would keep quiet for the sake love for her man. She could not complain because her fiancé’s family did not like her. That kind of silence in a relationship is not good (Verbatim interview response).

The responses demonstrate that through the mechanism of internalisation, audience learnt new values or reinforced existing ones such as patience, self-belief (guts), submission and resolution.

The findings show that viewers of *Simply Maria* negotiate the meaning of representations and adapt aspects of cultural values to shape their own identities. This happens at different levels, but first of all, the reformatting of *Simply Maria* in an indigenous Ghanaian language made it more attractive and meaningful. As a

result of this adaptation of the telenovela as opposed to adoption, there was no evidence of the perpetuation of cultural identity loss as a consequence of cultural globalisation as suggested by Raikhan et al. (2014).

The local language broadcast and subsequent post-broadcast studio discussions made *Simply Maria* more appealing to viewers and stymied the hegemonic reading of the text. Consistent with the position of Hall's encoding/decoding model of audience reception, at this negotiated position, audience decoded issues such as tolerance, submission and resistance in the abstract sense but complexly situated and condemned or appropriated such tendencies from the Ghanaian cultural perspective. This is possible because at the negotiated position, viewers mount barriers and deconstruct dominant codes which disturb the homogenising effect of global texts.

Further, the broadcast of *Simply Maria* in a local Ghanaian language (Twi) significantly transformed the text from an entirely global product to a mixed one. Although this has cultural and economic imperatives (Baltruschat, 2002), it dulled the distinctively Latin American flavour of the text to an extent (Havens, 2004), thereby making it a mixed culture or hybrid text easily negotiated and appropriated by local audience.

Suffice to say, through hybridisation, local cultures may be brushed but not doused or obfuscated as feared by critics of cultural imperialism. Following from this, the contribution of television to national culture may have changed but it is not lost. The shaping of television content to suit local audience preferences, as suggested by Endong (2014) and Haynes (2011) and confirmed by the indigenisation of *Simply Maria*, can therefore be seen as an important, even essential adaptation mechanism in Ghana.

Conclusion

The showing of *Simply Maria* marked an important era of telenovela broadcast in Ghana as it is the first Mexican telenovela to be telecast in a local Ghanaian language. By reformatting the original Spanish language of *Simply Maria* to Twi, producers indigenised the

telenovela, dulling its distinct Latin American flavour. Invariably, *Simply Maria* influenced the individual identities of viewers as it became part of established popular culture that shaped personal views and values.

The indigenisation of *Simply Maria* also made it hybridised and viewers' reception was mainly at a negotiated position. The hybridisation and negotiated interpretation reflected in the mechanisms of influence, namely identification with characters, value judgement of representations and internalisation of behaviour desirable to viewers, subverted the homogenising effect of *Simply Maria* as a global text. This implies that indigenisation and hybridisation may be suitable modes of adapting to, and managing, the strong currents of cultural globalisation as globalisation shows no sign of slowing down or sparing anything in its path.

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