'LIKE AN OLDER FAMILY MEMBER': YOUNG AFRICANS' PERCEPTIONS OF COCA-COLA'S SUGAR-SWEETENED BEVERAGE BRAND IN SOUTH AFRICA AND NIGERIA

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Abstract
This paper, through an examination of the perceptions of a purposefully enlisted set of young Africans from Nigeria and South Africa, brings to the fore how Coca-Cola is embedded culturally and symbolically in the lives of these consumers, who liken the sugar-sweetened, multinational beverage to 'an older family member' and regard it as a 'local' drink and brand. The paper highlights how this has the propensity to enhance the enthusiastic and habitual consumption of Coca-Cola by these young Africans and their contemporaries with similar perceptions. Located within a qualitative research design, the study, amongst other reasons, was conducted against the backdrop of the surge in the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages in Africa and other low- and middle-income countries and the increasing targeting of these regions by multinational food and beverage companies for their growth and profit, as consumers in the global north become more health aware.
Keywords: sugar-sweetened beverages, coca-cola, young africans, big food, obesity.

INTRODUCTION

Global consumption of sugar has increased rapidly since the 1960s and the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (hereafter referred to as SSBs) has been confirmed to play a considerable role in an upsurge in most countries (Montgomery and Chester, 2009; Monteiro et al., 2010; World

Health Organisation (WHO), 2016; Chan, 2016; Akingbade, 2020). These SSBs in turn have been shown to make a direct contribution to the sharp increase in the global average rates of obesity, diabetes and other diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in both the developed and the developing worlds (Igumbor et al., 2012; Moodie et al., 2013; Stuckler et al., 2016; WHO, 2019). Although studies show that lack of physical exercise also contributes to a high NCD rate (Onyike et al., 2003; Gilman, 2008; WHO, 2019), unhealthy dietary patterns such as the consumption of 'durable, palatable and ready to consume' (Moodie et al., 2013: 671) products, including SSBs, have been highlighted as a major risk factor (Monteiro et al., 2010; Bankman, 2013; WHO, 2019). Despite a growing awareness of diet-related NCDs, these health conditions are still responsible for over 70 per cent of deaths recorded worldwide (WHO, 2019, 2023).

Meanwhile, the global growth rate in terms of reach and market share of multinational food and beverage companies (also referred to in this paper as 'Big Food') that produce SSBs and other 'palatable and ready to consume' products is becoming more evident, despite the pervasiveness of overweight, obesity and other diet-related NCDs (Onyike et al., 2003; Kruger et al., 2005; WHO, 2018). Existing literature suggests that in recent years much of this growth has been in the developing world, as Big Food corporations consistently target Africa and other low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) for almost all their planned growth and profit (Moodie et al., 2013; Agyenim-Boateng et al, 2015; Jacobson, 2017; Lopez, Loopstra, McKee et al., 2017). New policies and more and better journalism and communication in the global north about the health risks of sugar and SSBs have helped to lessen and even halt consumption of SSBs in the developed world, resulting in a sales decline in Big Food's home markets (WHO, 2016; McGrath, 2016; Kell, 2017). Africa has less health journalism and fewer resources to run effective public health campaigns, and the targeting of the continent is suggested to be partly attributable to it having the highest population growth rate in the world and a rapidly emerging middle class (Bremner, 2012; Allison, 2013; Dugmore, 2014; Leke, Jacobson and Lund, 2016; United Nations Report, 2018 Statista Report, 2024). Conveniently too for these Big Food companies, there are usually fewer restrictions in the developing world on marketing such products to children (Igumbor et al., 2012; Chan, 2016; WHO, 2016; Yamoah, 2021).

Coca-Cola – the focus of this paper – remains the leading SSB corporation in Africa and has been implicated in the surge of SSB sales and consumption on the continent, as the Big Food company continually intensifies its advertising and marketing campaigns and draws on the brand's equity (Bankman, 2013; Sasu, 2023). Coca-Cola maintains a lead in Nigeria, despite the growing presence of other cheaper 'cola' drinks, while in South Africa the brand for over a decade has recorded an annual increase in SSB sales (Statista Report, 2023; Sasu, 2023).

As SSB consumption surges in Africa, existing studies suggest that young adults are experiencing faster weight gain as they consume more unhealthy diets than any other age group (Adepoju and Ojo, 2014; Jacobson, 2017; Akingbade, 2020). This could be related to the shift by Big Food companies to greater use of digital, social and mobile media, as a strategic marketing platform to target young adults who use these extensively (Rambe and Retumetse, 2017; Gertner and Rifkin, 2018; Boachie et al., 2023). This is evident in the large marketing budgets and expenditures by Coca-Cola and other Big Food corporations that specifically target young adults, as a marketing executive at Coca-Cola stated in 2017 that the company needs to keep up its intense focus on the youth because they 'are not caring about their health yet' (Jacobson, 2017: 312).

It is against this backdrop that this paper discusses the reception of Coca-Cola as a brand and an SSB amongst two sets of purposefully selected young – urban Africans in Nigeria and South Africa – within the context of their lived experiences of SSB consumption. This is where the self-understandings of these young Africans about Coca-Cola as a brand and SSB is brought to the fore. The specific focus on young Africans from Nigeria and South Africa stems from the similar rapid urbanisations in both countries which are often accompanied by the 'necessity' to indulge in the consumption of 'ready-to-eat' and 'ready-to-drink' products, and Coca-Cola's increased marketing efforts to avail itself of this development and secure more loyal and addicted consumers (Akarolo-Anthony et al., 2014; Akingbade, 2020, 2024).

This paper posits that to mitigate excessive consumption of SSBs as one of the measures to combat the increasing cases of diet-related NCDs, there is a need for qualitative studies that explore

the past and current lived experiences of habitual consumers in terms of their relationship with SSBs and their desire to consume these products. This is because consumer choices are not without context and history, which can be cross-generational and complex. Also, a review of extant literature suggests there is a dearth of studies in Africa that seek to understand the experiences of young adults with regard to their reception of, and consumption culture around, SSBs.

Located within the qualitative paradigm of enquiry, this paper is underpinned by an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. This approach underscores the essence and structure of exploring lived experiences of research participants as an interpretative endeavour that takes into account and emphasises that all human beings are in a 'continual process of constructing, interpreting and making sense of their world' (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 28-29). Drawing on the non-random technique of purposeful sampling that evidences the 'conscious and deliberate intentions of those who apply the procedures' (Deacon et al., 1999: 50), this study enlisted participants amongst young Nigerians who are students at the University of Lagos and young South Africans who are students at Rhodes University.

Young Africans from whom data was elicited are between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-four. Preliminary observations and interviews discovered them to be enthusiastic consumers of Coca-Cola who have had a 'relationship' with the brand throughout their childhood and teenage years. Intensity sampling – a type of purposeful sampling where information-rich locations are selected as they significantly, but not extremely, manifest the phenomenon of interest to be examined (Patton, 1990; Suri, 2011) – underlies the choice of the University of Lagos and Rhodes University as geographical locations where young Africans were enlisted as participants. Data was elicited from the participants through observation, semi-structured focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews[1].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis and discussion presented in this paper are informed by consumer culture theory (CCT). Researchers have usefully drawn on it to examine consumerism and purchase decisions by highlighting the lived experiences of consumers and the historical and socio-cultural contexts and dimensions of consumption. These are neither accessible nor fully explainable through more survey-based studies (Annamma and Li, 2012). Arguably, CCT is particularly useful in today's globalised world that is characterised by rapid social changes. These changes are captured in literature by concepts such as urbanisation and technological innovations, and by youthful audiences who increasingly develop their sense of difference and their self-identity through their consumption practices (Annamma and Li, 2012). Related to approaches used in audience reception studies, CCT through its four key strands – consumer identity projects; marketplace cultures; the socio-historic patterning of consumption; and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies – proffers a framework that helps connect interdisciplinary fields, such as cultural studies, marketing and consumer studies, and media studies. It also usefully helps to tease out and make sense of contextual self-understandings of young adults who are habitual consumers of Coca-Cola in two African locations.

Defining 'consumer culture' as a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources – and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic, and materials on which they depend – are mediated through markets (Arnould and Thompson 2005), the consumer identity projects as a strand of CCT postulates that people derive some of the sense of who they are from what they consume or desire to consume (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). This is premised on the assertion that the marketplace has become a source of mythic and symbolic resources through which people, including those who lack the means with which to fully participate in the market as consumers, construct various narratives of identity (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). The consumer identity projects domain of CCT places emphasis on consumer agency, where the consumer is 'recognised' as an agent and empowered identity seeker, who draws on marketplace resources in constructing his or her own identity and meaning to make sense of products and environments (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011).

Marketplace cultures as the second strand of CCT assert that consumption has become a dominant human practice that mediates social linkages and relationships within consumers' lived experiences (Askegaard, 2015). Through the pursuit of common consumption interests, CCT scholars here assert that consumers find ways to collectively identify and participate in rituals of solidarity that are grounded in common lifestyle interests and activities (Askegaard, 2015). Relevant to this as drawn on in this paper is Thompson and Arsel's (2004) concept of a hegemonic 'brandscape', which asserts that global brands and products exert systematic influence on marketplace cultures in local contexts.

The third strand of CCT speaks to the socio-historic patterning of consumption. It hinges on assertions that individual consuming subjects operate within cultural, economic and political frames which are institutional, and social structures that shape and limit how such consumers think, feel and act in the contemporary marketplace (Nairn et al., 2008; Rokka, 2010). The fourth strand, mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies, draws on perspectives and debates in critical media studies and other related fields. It posits that mass media platforms – and newer forms of digital, social and mobile media – are potentially used to convey systems of meaning in the form of 'ideological instructions' that tend to channel and reproduce consumers' thoughts and actions, with the aim of creating desires for certain identities and lifestyle ideals, while defending dominant interests (Fiske, 1987; Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

Although CCT has been critiqued by some theorists, it is used as an analytical frame in this paper as it has remained useful in research projects on contemporary subcultures and consumption studies that has provided nuanced analyses of how consumers make sense of global brands within their local contexts and how through this they collectively create value and experiences.

The remaining sections in this paper outline an analysis of the data using themes extrapolated after coding and initial analysis, as these succinctly convey the meaning units and latent content embedded therein. Pseudonyms have been used in the excerpts cited from the data, as participants were assured their identities would be concealed. This has served to ensure their narratives are detailed and factual, and devoid of any tendency to hold back.

COCA-COLA's CULTURAL EMBEDDEDNESS AS AN SSB AND BRAND

The lived experiences shared by the enlisted young Africans from Nigeria and South Africa suggest that Coca-Cola as a brand and SSB has over time occupied a central place in their lives, and continues to maintain its centrality in their day-to-day activities. This stems from the researcher's quest and curiosity to understand the micro-cultural dynamics and meanings through which their foremost engagements with Coca-Cola were constructed, prior to their present level of enthusiasm and continued consumption of the SSB. These meanings indicate an absence of a conspicuous and conscious awareness of how Coca-Cola has come to be part of their everyday lives, despite their fondness for it.

Coca-Cola is like an older family member to me that I just grew to know … it's way before me but I know it's family. (James, FG1; RU, South Africa)

Coca-Cola is part of our day-to-day activities and it's been like that since God knows when. It's almost an impossible task to trace back this stuff. I mean, do I even know? (Kunle, FG2; UL, Nigeria)

For me it's not a conscious thing. I just know I've come to believe so much in Coca-Cola and I think it'll be futile to even try to get me to recount how the whole thing began. To me it's like you're asking me to tell you how/when my toenails grow. (Faith, FG1; UL, Nigeria)

Although there are things you know and not just feel, but that doesn't mean you can explain them because it's more like an unconscious thing that has just come to be a part of your being. (Sharina, FG4; RU, South Africa)

The above narrative excerpts suggest that research participants' relationship with the brand and SSB they have come to like and consume did not start off as 'a conscious thing' from their earliest days as children. This provides insight useful in unpacking how these youthful Coca-Cola enthusiasts make sense of the global brand within their varying local contexts. It speaks to the position of researchers (Holt, 1995; Rokka, 2010) who affirm, drawing on their various research projects, that the cultural inclinations and social patterning constituted and sustained in social processes within which consuming subjects engage with market products are not necessarily a conscious phenomenon. However, while the lived experiences shared by these young Africans indicate that they could not easily articulate the earliest details of how this phenomenon which they consume regularly had become part of their everyday lives, likening it to 'an older family member' suggests that the enthusiasm and deference to the brand as the first choice and main SSB consumed is not necessarily or solely a means of satisfying needs as autonomous youths or reflexive postmoderns, but an unconscious inclination to align with a 'known family member' rather than identify with 'unknown relatives'. Young Africans who have similar self-understandings about Coca-Cola have the propensity to have consumer goals, choices and behaviours that are motivated by this unconscious inclination that stems from loyalty to a phenomenon regarded as 'an older family member'.

The reference to Coca-Cola as 'an older family member' – which other focus group participants (where this was mentioned) agree with, through their non-verbal gestures and subsequent narratives – can be further understood within the lens of CCT's consumer identity projects, as these young Africans seem to derive some sense of who they are from their relationship with Coca-Cola. This aligns with the theorising that people derive some sense of who they are from what they consume or desire to consume while drawing on such products and resources in the marketplace to construct various narratives of identity.

These young consumers' perceptions of Coca-Cola as an unconscious and background phenomenon that predates them and has been embedded in their upbringings also affirm the notion of it being an inter-generational brand that spans across different age groups within which it is known and consumed. While this is expected considering that the history of Coca-Cola dates back to 1886 and to the 1920s to 1940s in Africa (Coca-Cola History, n.d.), it is pertinent to underscore the way in which the brand is ingrained in the subconsciousness of consumers from childhood. This is exemplified in an excerpt cited above, where Coca-Cola is likened to the natural growth of toenails: although a known occurrence, the process that leads to it cannot be intelligently articulated or unpacked by those who are not trained in the relevant scientific fields. This suggests that the pursuit of common consumption interest amongst postmodern African youths who consume Coca-Cola as a global product in their varying localised settings is cushioned by their particular African upbringings and cultural contexts of which the brand is a part. This is consistent with CCT's view of consumer experiences and performative identities, as first being a result of embedded dynamic and interactive processes which have the propensity to frame consumers' differing horizons of conceivable action, feeling, meaning and thought patterns (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Bajde, 2014).

The cited excerpts below further highlight how Coca-Cola has over the years become embedded as a background or unconscious 'brandscape' within the cultural contexts of the young Africans purposefully enlisted for the study, and how this interplays with the interactive processes that characterise their everyday actions, feelings, meanings and thought patterns.

> Though I'm not sure I can vividly remember my childhood days and memories with respect to Coca-Cola … it was part of my Sunday afternoons after what seems to be a long and boring church service. I also remember as a 6-year-old I visited my Dad's office often and he always has a can of Coke at a corner on his table. I always wonder why Coke though … I never asked him but I just think it's something cool to at least identify with. (Tham, FG2; RU, South Africa)

> Apart from it being my favourite drink and brand, it is something that reminds me of my late granny who raised me in Aba, [south-east Nigeria] because she is a Coke person. Coke to me is the only soft drink out there. I don't do alcoholic drinks and it's the only beverage drink I take. This is because of the kind of initiation I unconsciously received into Coke consumption by my

grandma plus the fact that Coke represents a modern brand at the same time an old brand that has stood the test of time, if you know what I mean. (Nneoma, FG5; UL, Nigeria)

For the study participants, the childhood experiences of Coke – exemplified in the excerpts above that were shared in the focus group sessions – aided the recollection of certain instances in their past which they were not able to remember or thought were not related to the focus areas (as they later revealed). The above excerpts, alongside the researcher's first-hand observations during fieldwork, reveal that the young Africans despite their varying backgrounds and societal affiliations were able to relate to the experiences about which others reminisced.

Drawing on Slater's (1997) position on consumption, since these sets of youthful consumers do not make the goods through which they reproduce everyday life, they unconsciously operate within the confines of available commodities, as passed down to them from the older generation. This speaks to their consumption habits and value creation without recourse to the fact that the companies that own these commodities – in this case, Coca-Cola – are primarily interested in profit and economic values, rather than, say, prioritising their bodily health or upholding their cultural values as Africans. Nneoma's narration (above) exemplifies this, as Coca-Cola to her resonates with the life and times of her late grandmother, although she was only able to start connecting what she says might be the underlining reason why she is so fond of the drink when she was listening to others share their experiences during the focus group. Nneoma has clearly always operated within the confines of Coca-Cola as a brand and according to her – as later confirmed during a follow-up individual in-depth interview – she has never considered giving a thought to other SSBs, because Coca-Cola resonates with an elderly figure in her life whom she holds in high esteem.

Also insightful is the excerpt from Tham (again, above) who discovered that whenever she visits her dad's office he 'always has a can of Coke at a corner on his table'. Drawing on this experience she concludes that this particular SSB is 'something cool to at least identify with'. This self-understanding about Coca-Cola being a brand to identify with is a derivative of what she believes is her dad's position about the product, as the SSB is not just in their household but also in a different space and setting: the dad's place of work. This self-understanding about Coke, drawing on her dad's appraisal of the product privately at home and publicly at his place of work, validates the SSB to her all through her childhood days until now. This experience has resulted in Coke being the SSB that characterises her actions and thought patterns with regard to consumption. In fact, she asserted during a follow-up interview that she never consciously knew of the existence of other SSBs until she was about eleven years old, as Coke was the only SSB in her household.

Similarly, the shared experiences of other young Africans from Nigeria and South Africa who participated in the focus group sessions resonate with the excerpts cited above. CCT's domain on socio-historic patterning of consumption which posits that individual consuming subjects operate within certain frames, such as cultural and social structures that shape and limit how such consumers think, feel and act in the contemporary marketplace helps to make sense of the excerpts cited above and a plethora of similar narratives in the data that confirm Coca-Cola's cultural embeddedness in the lives of the homogenous group of young Africans enlisted for the study.

COCA-COLA's SYMBOLISM AS A MARKER BEYOND PHYSICAL CONSUMPTION AND A HEGEMONIC BRANDSCAPE

The transcripts emanating from the focus group interviews and the individual in-depth interview sessions from which data was gathered, alongside observation during fieldwork, suggest that by having regular Coke consumption interspersed with various activities that characterised the childhood days of this study's participants, Coca-Cola goes beyond just being present in their day-to-day activities. This multinational SSB brand resonates symbolically amongst this enlisted group of young Africans, as a marker that signifies value beyond the actual physical consumption of Coke.

It seemed to me then as a child that having a chilled bottle of Coke as part of my Sundays was a reward my siblings and I get for being a good girl and staying attentive during service unlike

some other troublesome kids. How I so much looked forward to these Sundays as a kid. (Tham, FG2; RU, South Africa)

I think the way Grandma sees things is funny considering how Coke, to her, symbolises some sort of reward for diligence. When she wants to tell me I've done something she's pleased about she'll buy me Coke! [Laughs] ... and I think it's quite funny that I still unknowingly do that most of the time. Thinking about it now, I kinda realise that I buy Coke once I feel I've done something worthwhile .... (Nneoma, FG5; UL, Nigeria)

The above excerpts – alongside other similar narratives in the data – suggest how Coca-Cola has been symbolically embodied and 'institutionalised' amongst the cultural layers that underlie the current consumption of the brand by this study's participants. This 'symbolic embeddedness', being an integral part in the lives of older generations in the families of these young Nigerians and South Africans, has a potent set of meanings that has been unconsciously passed down to, and accepted by, their generation. This set of symbolic meanings, which offer insights into background events about Coca-Cola, is in line with CCT which posits that meaning remains a fundamental aspect of symbolic consumption and lies at the heart of consumer culture, as it is not only real (that is, it can be discovered and interpreted) but the understanding gleaned from it forms the primary gestalt within which consumers exist (Thompson et al., 2013).

In congruence with CCT and Featherstone's (1987) assertion on consumer preferences and lifestyle practices, the enjoyment, satisfaction and different modes of identity formation that these young Africans derive from Coca-Cola is linked to how value is being created within their respective cultural spaces. Beyond consuming a can or bottle of Coke, for instance, there is the propensity for young Africans with experiences similar to those outlined in the excerpts above to operate predominantly within a particular thought pattern, where Coca-Cola has over time been subconsciously regarded as a marker that symbolises enjoyment with loved ones and a reward for good behaviour and diligence. For instance, there are participants whose shared experiences, similar to that of Tham cited above, imply that during their childhood years Coca-Cola symbolised enjoyable family time which comes after the weekly religious activities. That this specific SSB brand is deemed fit as a reward for good behaviour during religious practices and 'some sort of reward for diligence' indicates how the current enthusiastic consumption of Coca-Cola by this set of young Africans is underlined by the structuring influence these childhood experiences had on them. This is in line with CCT's anchoring proposition, that to understand consumers' positions and choices within a plethora of products available in the marketplace, we need to examine and understand the long existing relationship(s) between these consumers and the 'structuring' influence embedded within their respective cultural spheres, as they define themselves consciously or unconsciously by these positions and choices (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Annamma and Li, 2012).

The earliest forms of participants' experiences and memories of Coke (such as those cited above) have also seen them reference consumption of the brand while growing up in their households as a 'norm' or 'tradition' that has played out before them as kids, over and over again, at the instance of both the older generations in their respective households and the larger community. This has consequently set the background 'canvas' of ideological instructions and inducements that has been unconsciously or subconsciously passed down to – and received by – a generation of these young Africans. These ideological inducements or instructions, which as posited in CCT is encoded in cultural ideals or norms, come from the interpersonal bond that this study's participants have with Coca-Cola, as the SSB and brand, during their childhood days, has been presented to them as an important part of family meals and relaxation time, birthdays, hangouts and weddings, and a reward for hard work and good behaviour.

This brings to the fore the concept of the intergenerational 'hegemonic brandscape' – a highly sought-after apex for any consumer product to establish – as the data suggests that Coca-Cola, in the families of the young Africans purposefully enlisted for this study, operates as a hegemonic brandscape, as it has, for multiple years and even generations, maintained a structuring influence,

underlined by ideological inducements and instructions within which this homogeneous set of youths function and habitually consume the SSB and brand.

COCA-COLA AS A 'LOCAL' SSB AND BRAND

> It certainly sounds funny and odd to me to see or think of Coke as foreign. It's not just like an older family member, it is a solid local drink that is ours and you can never go wrong with it. (James, FG1; RU, South Africa)

It is against the backdrop of the context discussed in the last two sections that the young Africans enlisted for this study say, and insist, as exemplified in the excerpt above, that Coca-Cola is a 'local' brand and SSB and not a western brand that comes from the global north. Unpacking the micro-cultural context that underlies their current habitual consumption of Coke, and their enthusiasm about the brand as outlined in the sections above, aligns with relevant literature (such as Holt, 1995; Luna and Gupta, 2001) that asserts this will help research projects to avoid the often superficial descriptions of reception and consumption patterns of products. These patterns fail to take account of the specific imbricated layers of cultural contexts and meanings that collectively influence consumer actions, as these micro-cultural and even inter-generational contexts can profoundly influence individuals in terms of their current preferences and consumption practices.

The subliminal modes through which childhood engagements with the brand have come to be as an established part of the day-to-day activities of this study's participants have the tendency to inhibit perceptions of the brand as being 'foreign' by these young Africans whose self-understandings of Coca-Cola are consistent with what D'Andrade (1990) refers to as a 'cultural model' through which consumers feel, think and act. The 'internalisation' or 'naturalisation' of Coca-Cola has over time made the brand a reliable cultural model to these participants, through embodied habits, social practices and interactions which have provided constellations of objectified meanings, as evidenced in the excerpts cited earlier. This has conveniently turned Coca-Cola into a cultural brand that these participants recognise primarily as one of their own and not as a foreign brand headquartered in the global north. Exemplifying this, as earlier highlighted, is the participants' reference to Coca-Cola as a 'tradition'. Participants also reiterated during some of the focus group interview sessions that the brand has long become a local one and it is 'wrong' for anyone to insist that it is foreign. Also, none of the study participants in Nigeria or South Africa were deeply aware of the particular history of Coca-Cola, either as an American product per se, or its penetration of African markets. For instance, the year Coca-Cola was established and the names of the business people linked to the ownership were not known by the young Africans, while fewer than half of the participants knew either the country or city where the brand's headquarters is located.

The ease with which study participants identify with Coke and rationalise their positions about the locality and their 'ownership' of the SSB and brand – as observed during fieldwork – further foregrounds how Coca-Cola over the decades has interacted within study participants' communities and cultural spaces and become intertwined with their cultural norms and values. Drawing on CCT's theorising, this indicates that the recognition received by the indigenised version of the brand stems from the mutually constitutive and productive ways it has featured in the lives of young Africans since childhood – hence, their spontaneity in rejecting narratives that point Coca-Cola in the direction of being 'foreign'.

Contrary to the cultural homogenisation thesis, these youthful consumers of Coca-Cola still hold on to their unique traditions and youthful adventures while appropriating the brand as an SSB, which over time has been subsumed within their cultural experiences. This is evidenced in the narratives that further ensued during data collection, where participants described local festivals and traditional events held in their various communities, recently and when they were much younger, that had Coke as the main SSB. As a result of decades of Coca-Cola's interpenetrations across several communities and cultures, the brand has exerted a structuring influence within local markets and consumption practices in such a way that these participants, in response, consequently appropriate the brand within their cultural practices.

These decades of interpenetrations have given rise to a culture of Coke consumption where the brand, rather than eroding the culture and traditional lifestyles of generations of African consumers, has gone through a nuanced process of 'indigenisation'. It is through this process that it becomes a rational decision for the present hub of African youths, who are enthusiastic consumers of the brand, to insist that Coca-Cola is a local brand they unconsciously grew up with and became accustomed to – thereby constructing their identities within the framework of the symbolic resources the brand offers or affords them. This is consistent with Strelitz's (2003) critique of the essentialism inherent in the cultural imperialism or homogenisation thesis: when drawing on Massey (1992), he argues that places should no longer be seen as internally homogeneous, bounded areas, but rather as 'spaces of interaction'. These spaces are where local identities are constructed out of material and symbolic resources which should be recognised, even though such resources may not be local in their origin. This, alongside the self-understandings of the participants as unpacked so far, is in line with Cayla and Eckhardt's (2008) assertion that globalisation is beyond just a western-oriented one- or two-way street, but rather a multiplicity of streets with intertwined cultures.

CONCLUSION

While this study participants' insistence that Coca-Cola is a local brand indicates their agency in appropriating the brand and SSB within their cultural contexts, their agency is confined within the structuring influence and discourse of the Big Food company and conforms with a value layer (that is, aim) of the multinational corporation, which is to advance its profit and economic value in LMICs. The more the notion or claim of Coca-Cola being a local brand is held onto, the more the propensity for these young Africans to remain enthusiastic consumers of the SSB and brand, as this stimulates their patronage, consumption and commitment to the brand, thereby enabling the brand's continued relevance in their 'world' and that of other young Africans with similar self-understandings. This is consistent with assertions that Africans through forms of black cultural discourses – such as songs, folktales, traditional stories and narratives – are increasingly seeking ways of appropriating products and reaffirming themselves and their cultures decades after the passage of the civil rights act in the 1960s and declaration of independence in many African nations (Yenika-Agbaw and Mhando, 2014).

The role of the various forms of mass media (and the relatively and comparatively newer forms of digital, social and mobile media) cannot be overemphasised in conveying and sustaining ideological inducements and instructions that keep these youthful consumers within the confines of the structuring influence in which they operate. In consonance with this are the lived experiences shared by the participants about how they enjoy Coke's marketing messages, especially those that feature personalities they identify with as kith and kin. These personalities hail from the same cultural background as theirs, which enables unfettered identity play and modes of self-creation that negate Coca-Cola's foreignness and align with their self-understandings of the SSB and brand. This speaks to CCT's position that the various forms of media tend to channel and reproduce consumers' thoughts and actions with the aim of creating or affirming the desires for certain identities and lifestyle ideals, while defending dominant interests.

To effectively campaign about the dangers inherent in excessive consumption of SSBs and other unhealthy diets, it is imperative for stakeholders, policymakers and other relevant organs of government in African nations and other LMICs to incorporate the contextual self-understandings of consumers and the accompanying dynamics into their decision and policy-making processes and meetings. Such qualitative, in-depth and context-sensitive analyses and discussions must inform action plans mapped out to systematically reorient targeted demographics of habitual consumers of unhealthy products churned out by Big Food corporations. This is important considering Coca-Cola's cultural and symbolical embeddedness in the daily activities of this study's participants and its reception as a local brand worthy of their enthusiastic and continuous patronage.

Research ethics statement

This paper is the author's original research and has not been previously published in another journal. All ethical approval processes were completed.

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Notes

[1]The data discussed in this paper is part of the data the researcher gathered while on fieldwork for his doctoral research project. Seven focus group interviews were conducted amongst twenty-nine young adults who were undergraduates at Nigeria's University of Lagos, while six focus group interviews were conducted amongst thirty-two young adults who were undergraduates at Rhodes University, South Africa. The focus group interviews had a minimum of three and a maximum of six participants. Also, four individual in-depth interviews were held at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, while five interviews were held at South Africa's Rhodes University. These individual in-depth interviews complemented the focus group interviews, thereby giving clarity and insights into relatively ambiguous themes that came up during the focus group sessions. The focus group sessions and individual in-depth interviews were held in public spaces on the campuses of the University of Lagos and Rhodes University. All ethical approval processes were completed, with written and verbal consent of research participants sought before every session. The focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews at the University of Lagos were held in the months of October and November 2018, while the ones at Rhodes University were held in the months of May and June 2019.