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## An Intertextual Analysis of Selected Mobile Telecommunication Advertisements on Nigerian TV

Adebola Adebileje and Tolulope Adebileje



### Abstract

This study aimed at analyzing the intertextuality of selected telecommunication adverts of *etisalat*, *glo* and *airtel* as viewed on Nigerian television stations through a practical approach. Mobile telecommunication advertisements on television are aired creatively through novel ideas

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that have gone beyond the normal common advert of just written words and sounds. In an effort to captivate viewers' attention to their products, advert providers now employ intertextual devices to weave in a network of bits and pieces of our culture (music, religion, politics, etc) and movie or television celebrities as a technique of relating products with stardom and life style consequently, persuading viewers to buy their products. Hence, this paper analyzed three randomly selected telecom adverts: *etisalat*, *glo*, and *airtel* among others and discovered the use of intertextual devices such as humour, popular celebrities, symbolic codes and popular music by the advert providers. It was revealed that viewers or intended target audience naturally evoked certain associations in their minds (self-referentiality) as they interpret and understand these devices and then connect with the products. Conclusively, the correct interpretations of intertextual devices in viewers' minds as intended by advertisements providers account to a large extent for the general success of these adverts. This is evident in the boom in telecommunication business in Nigeria.

## **Introduction**



Global satellite system communication (GSM) was established in Nigeria to replace the government owned Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL) which had woefully failed to perform. Since then, the GSM business has been experiencing quite an impressive boom across Nigeria. One major factor that could be responsible for this boom is the novelty of advertising on TV and since there are many of such companies in Nigeria, competition has been quite stimulating and aggressive. Hence, TV happens to be the best preferred medium for Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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advertisement because well over half of the Nigerian population watch the TV. In the US for instance, Robert (2010) states that TV has become the hegemonic medium and 99% of all households have a TV and it is seen on an average of 7 hours a day per household.

Buss (1994) is of the opinion that TV advertisement has an advantage over other media because it approaches its target group through the visual and the aural channels of perception. Although, advertisement on the TV can be expensive, telecommunication companies seem determined to spend heavily as long as millions will view their products, then they gradually regain the money expended on adverts when their products receive patronage of the people. Hence, advertisement providers need to be innovative and creative in sustaining viewers' attention to watching TV regularly. In their innovative strategy, they lift original ideas from a film, drama, music, book or TV programme and use such to advertise their products. This is where intertextuality in advertisement comes to fore.

William (2004) describes intertextuality as a means of providing depth to the fictional reality portrayed in the medium by employing such techniques as a popular character in a movie being used as the spokesman of a product in an advert. In the light of this definition, it has been observed that tele-communication companies always come up with a range of new advertising ideas that would attract and sustain viewers' attention and interest and make them want to associate the originality of the advert with the product.

### **The Concept of Intertextuality and TV Advertising**

The term intertextuality is a familiar term in the linguistic analysis of literary texts. According to Kirsteva (1966), intertextuality means when “meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader but instead, it is mediated through or filtered by codes imparted to the writer and reader by other texts”. Her concept of intertextuality shows a method of evaluating the function of literary and extra-literary materials without relating to the traditional concept of authorship. She considers this concept as a three dimensional textual space with three coordinates of dialogue referring to the author, the reader, and the pre-texts. This textual space has horizontal and vertical dimensions. In the horizontal dimension “the word in the text belongs to both the writing subject and the addressee, in the vertical dimension, the word in the text is oriented towards an anterior Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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or synchronic literary corpus” (Kristeva, 1980). However, the one major function common to all the dimensions is the referential function. There could be a degree of self-referentiality and self reflexivity that transcends the general network of bits and pieces of our everyday culture (Withalm, 2003).

Hoek (1978) defines the concept of intertextuality differently from the literary perspective. He relates this concept to the society and its history. His definition focuses on the intertextual context which he sees as space, not being the only textual context but leading to the context of society. However, Myers (1994) departs a little from the viewpoint of Hoek’s communal definition and extends his own description of intertextuality into the process of interpreting the linguistic features of one text to be able to understand it by relating it to the linguistic features in other texts. He sees language in adverts as being already used since “all adverts carry associations from other texts, adverts, novels, and everyday talk”.

Withalm (2003) believes that advert providers employ self-referentiality as a good way of achieving the goal of keeping viewers watching adverts and buying their products. He further explains self-referential elements in adverts as bringing about a strengthening of the emotional bonds of the audience to the adverts and celebrities.

Kristeva’s concept focuses on the role of the text which needs to be understood in a broader sense. Text no longer presents a unified meaning, instead it “determines the very procedure of a semiotics that, by studying the text as intertextuality, considers it as such within (the text of) society and history” (Kristeva 1980:37). In other words, intertextuality creates a relationship between one text and another on which it is based. Hence, “intertextuality is not a feature of the text alone but of the contract which reading it forges between its authors and readers” (Genneth, 1997). Textual allusion relies on a banking approach to knowledge. It requires that we collect and recognize discrete units of information.

Accordingly, intertextuality can be referred to as a system of textual references. In this system, a web of connections between the reader and the author of the message is established. The intensity of the connection depends on the readers’ or perceivers’ cultural knowledge and awareness.

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The concept of intertextuality has however, been expanded from its initial pure literary meaning to include the notion of imitation. In this sense, imitation focuses on the connection and relation between the text and the text receiver, and broadening the concept in the sense of a general cultural semiotic (Pflister 1991); hence, its relevance to the field of advertising.

Literarily, the term ‘intertextuality’ has become recently popular in the analysis of advertisements, TV shows, movies, and radio. It deals with the intricacies of linking the textual, visual and aural elements of an original message with the textual, visual and aural elements of other messages for the purpose of comprehension and acceptability.

In these cases, intertextuality is often used to provide depth to the fictional reality portrayed in the medium such as characters in one television show mentioning characters from another, some television adverts introducing humor to endear viewers to products, use of popular movie clips and the use of symbolic codes. Through these strategies, viewers are manipulated and persuaded in that the message finds its way to their sub consciousness. The implication is that TV adverts tend to portray a lifestyle or image rather than advertise the product by creating an emotional atmosphere that makes people feel good and identify with the message of the advert. Leiss et al (1990) notes that

The growing preponderance of visuals in adverts has enhanced the ambiguity of meaning embedded in message structures. Earlier advertising usually states its message quite explicitly through the medium of written text ..., but starting in the mid-1920’s, visual representation became complementary- that is, the text explained the visual (p 99).

These efforts are made by adverts providers, on one hand to bring new and inspiring experience to viewers who will regard the products as something exceptional and are more likely to buy it. This is important and necessary because if products are advertised in an old-fashioned and boring manner, viewers may see the product in the same light and may not buy. On the other hand, if adverts are premised on the fact that meaning is not transferred directly from sender to receiver but through mediation of codes imparted through other texts, then adverts must be done in a new and inspirational manner.

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Such intertextual devices are also employed to keep viewers watching and they represent a kind of reward to viewers for watching. Hence, advert producers speak to a higher form of media literacy where viewers are asked to generalize and abstract from specific texts. In other words, any text can become carved up into component signifiers which are meant to be appropriated to augment the symbolic exchange value of any commodity (Goldman, 2010). Appropriating narrative moments or scenes from films turns the meaning of any text into a floating signifier. The most common form is the celebrities/ spokespersons. Their presence summons forth the value they have accumulated as stars and attempt to transfer it to the product.

### **Intertextual Devices in Advertisement**

Advertisement affects its target audience in many ways although some viewers deny its persuasive effect on them. Advertisement on TV has a strong influence on viewers' visual and aural senses. Hence, it is important that advert producers use intertextual devices that are readily decoded and understood by viewers. Therefore, in order to decode codes and symbols hidden in the message of an advert, familiar references must be employed. This implies that a target population is successfully determined when it is able to read the intertext hidden in a message and arrive at the intended meaning.

Intertextual strategies are employed by advert providers to create an emotional atmosphere that makes people feel good and causes them to identify with the message of the advert. The cultural values and qualities of a society could be revealed through the use of colours and lightings to give a patriotic or national identity effect; it is also indicative of where the product was manufactured. For instance, *glo* and *etisalat* often depict the green and white colours (Nigerian national colours) in their adverts. Smith (1998) is of the opinion that the cultural illustration of a nation is pivotal to advertisement production in that basic features such as notable landmarks, common tradition and common economy go a long way to promote national identity.

Music and sound also have some positive effect on the mood of viewers. When popular music is used in adverts, viewers get attached to the advert and may end up buying the product. A special use of selected music brings a nostalgic feeling in the old if the product is meant for them as the advert makes them transfer or exchange value from the music to the product. Also, to connect Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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with the youth, their own kind of music is carefully selected for the advert of a product meant for them. Goldman (2010) is of the view that musical referents “work as a hook to anchor the association of the commodity with the everyday life of the consumer”. Thus, advert providers select from past or current and trendy musical hits as a means of attracting various target audiences.

Humour is a useful inter-textual device used by advert producers. This is because funny adverts last long in the minds of viewers. Also, when an advert makes its viewers laugh, they tend to connect this happy feeling with the product and then buy it. Stam (1992) refers to humour as a self-referential device that puts viewers in a lighter mood which brings about a relaxed state of expectation that renders viewers more permeable to the advert message.

The use of celebrities in advertising products is common. This is because viewers see the rich and famous as role models and would want to associate with them. If viewers see their loved celebrity using a product, the tendency is that they would want to use such a product. Withalm (2003) explains that advertisements rely on intertextuality in the sense of television celebrities acting as spokespersons for brands, thus relating the product to their stardom and features of their screen personality.

Codes and symbols are also used as symbolic suggestive processes (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). These codes establish meanings through symbols and in order to decode the hidden message of an advertisement, it is necessary to be familiar with the references made. Goldman (2010) believes that the ability of the audience to recognize codes and decipher them is a source of ego enhancement to them. Codes could be in form of colours, dressing, and lightings to depict certain messages.

In this vein, intertextuality reflects in telecommunication advertisements in which (famous people) celebrities are portrayed. This is important because the general public sees them as role models and aspires to be like them. When celebrities who they look up to use a certain telecommunication network on TV, people do not only want to buy the product so that they can be like their idols but they see the product as being the best.

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This study therefore analyzed specific features of intertextuality in selected telecommunication adverts which are *Glo*, *Airtel*, and *Etisalat* as presented on Nigerian TV.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This analysis is based on the concept of intertextuality as originally coined by Julia Kristeva, a French post-structuralist in the sixties. In this vein it is conceived as the determining of texts' meanings by the means of other texts. It could be described as the act of an author borrowing from and transforming a prior text or a reader's referencing of one text in the process of reading another. Kristeva (1966) was of the opinion that "the notion of intertextuality replaces the notion of intersubjectivity". In other words, the process of understanding a text or of deriving meaning from a text is not a one way traffic affair. The fact is that meaning is not transferred directly from a writer to a reader. Meaning from text is negotiated through, or filtered by codes imparted to the writer and reader by other texts. In other words, the meaning of an artistic work does not reside in that work but in the viewers.

Thus, analyses of *glo*, *etisalat* and *airtel* telecommunication adverts in this paper are provided on the assumption that as viewers find such adverts attractive and enjoyable, they are expected to understand the intended message.

### **Methodology**

The randomly selected telecommunication advertisements of *glo*, *etisalat* and *airtel* from the numerous adverts of telecom products are analyzed one after the other by identifying the intertextual devices employed by the different advert providers. The intertextual devices examined include the use of humour, celebrities, music and symbols and codes.

Jenny's (1982) description of the process of intertextuality was adapted for the criteria employed in identifying the process of intertextuality in the selected adverts. Such processes adapted and modified specifically for this study include the following:

- (a) What are the intertextual devices found in the adverts?
- (b) What is the content/background (societal/cultural) of the intertextual devices?

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- (c) What are the denotative meanings of the intertextual messages?
- (d) Are these devices (signifiers) easily identified and understood by the target audience?
- (e) Are the implicit meanings (symbols and codes) actually relevant to the product being advertised?

## **Intertextual Analyses of Selected Mobile Telecommunications TV Adverts**

### **Etisalat**

The advert starts with a comedy star popularly known as *Saka* running into the scene narrating to the audience the wonderful *etisalat* promo that gives users of *etisalat* a Blackberry phone every hour. He says this in Pidgin English which gives his story an element of humour. And then to show his excitement, *Saka* starts to dance the presently popular dance, *Alanta*, in a very funny way. The advert is aimed at youths and so a deliberate attempt to connect with them through the use of the Pidgin English and the *Alanta* dance. Apparently, the advert appeals to the youth. The advert producers use humour as an intertextual device to endear viewers to their product and to keep them watching the advert. Making viewers laugh brings a feeling of happiness for the product and the humor aspect also makes the advert more memorable.

Also, the use of symbolic codes could be deciphered from this advert scene. In the opening scene, *Saka* is seen wearing white ‘*dashiki*’ (a kind of blouse) and short ‘*sokoto*’ (a short pair of trousers) calling the attention of people. This signifies a cultural practice of the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria. A Yoruba Oba in those days had messengers who deliver his messages in market squares and other public places verbally. Such a messenger trekked briskly from the palace to the market square calling peoples’ attention by beating the gong in his hands and shouting the message at the point of his voice all at the same time. It is important therefore, for messengers to be clothed in smart and light clothes in order to deliver messages urgently and conveniently just like *Saka* in the advert delivering the message of *etisalat* to the youth.

This scene corroborates Hoek’s (1978) point of view who perceives intertextuality in a different context. He defines intertextuality in relation to the society including a reference to the history of that society. In other words, the intertextual context does not refer only to the textual context, but

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also to the societal context in the aspects of religion, politics, and aesthetics. Although, *Saka* is clad in white ‘messenger uniform’ to depict his role in the advert, all other participants are seen in colourful skimpy dresses, T-shirts and jeans, with fashionable hair dos to portray trendy youths who are the target of the advert.

The advert providers introduce the ‘*Alanta*’ dance as an intertextual device to create an emotional atmosphere that would tempt people, especially youths, to feel good and then influence them to identify with the message of the advert. In the advert scene, we see *Saka* dancing the popular *Alanta* dance joyfully and suddenly joined by some other equally happy youths. Thus, the advert providers not only advertised the product but also presented a lifestyle of the *alanta* dance because music and sound have a positive effect on the mood of the audience or viewers.

### **Airtel**

This particular advert introduces a new *airtel* tariff called the *10 over 10 club*. This name brings immediately to mind the popular *10 over 10* song by the respected and popular artiste called *Naeto C* especially as the advert starts with the song itself. Here, we see *airtel* bringing the contents of the song into the advert so as to appeal to the mind of the audience as they immediately connect to the name *10 over 10*. Moreover, we see a good use of humour as the tariff is introduced to the audience by a very funny speaking and funny looking character named *Ake*. *Ake* is seen dancing to the music in a ghetto-like neighbourhood with a gang of young boys who apparently were happy to have him in their midst. He moves with the joyful gang towards an antique looking customized *Jaguar* which is his car. This scene identifies distinctly with the low class which constitutes a larger part of the Nigerian population.

Here, the intertextual references work as a hook to anchor the association of the commodity with the everyday life of the consumers. Musical referent is introduced to elicit name recall so as to transfer or exchange value from the music to the product. This advert has drawn on the music which already has value among the youth as a way of attracting their attention. Hence, music like images has been broken down into signifier and the signified in this advert. Selecting the music of the present generation of youths and involving the phenomenon of everyday experience shows Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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the music as a signifier to evoke a sense of aesthetic identity. The surroundings in which the scene of the advert takes place gives people in this social class a sense of pride and value as they connect with the product.

While *Ake* is humorous in explaining the message of the *airtel* advert, a symbolic code is recognized in the use of the song *10 over 10*. This means 100% mathematically and translates to having complete connection with people all over the globe through the use of this *airtel* package branded *10 over 10*. *Ake*, still in the comical spirit, proudly shows viewers a snapshot of himself with the US President Obama to emphasize his global connection with all and sundry just by his membership in the *10 over 10 club*.

### **Glo**

*Glo* advertises a new tariff that affords the users the opportunity to call one person for as long as possible at a very low rate. To enact this idea is the much respected, much loved actor, *Nonso Diobi*. He acts the father of a little girl who calls home to tell his daughter that he won't be around that night to fulfill his promise of telling her bed time stories. The little girl sounded dejected and so the father decides to tell her the story right away through his mobile phone on the *glo* network. He tells the story and the daughter who apparently enjoys the story eagerly keeps saying 'and then' at every interval to listen to more stories. The father goes on and on and the humor comes in when we see the father falling asleep instead of the daughter who still calls out 'and then'.

The intertextuality here is seen in the use of a famous celebrity, *Nonso Diobi* who people would lovingly regard as their role model. He plays the role of the high social class who is rich, sophisticated and very busy. This is depicted by the manner in which he is fully clad in good shirt and tie, the state of his plush office setting in which a secretary is working and the elegant house within which the beautiful little daughter is seen. Her bedroom portrays opulence and her pretty mother is what any man would desire and want to associate with. Although, the culture of bedtime stories seems foreign to the African culture, it is actually premised on African moon light tales where children are gathered under the moon light and starry sky for story sessions given by an elderly person after which they all go back home to sleep.

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Symbols and codes are seen in the colours used for the background of the different scenes in this advert. *Nonso* wears white and green is seen every where around his office and home. The colours white and green are the Nigerian colours

Withalm (2003) is of the view that “TV adverts producers have always relied on intertextuality in the sense of a mosaic or network of bits and pieces of our everyday culture and movie or TV celebrities have always acted as spokespersons for brands, thus relating the product to their stardom and feature of their screen personae”.

## **Conclusion**

This study reveals that several benefits abound in the use of intertextual devices in advertisements. It is an effective means of getting the active attention of the target audience. In other words, viewers actively engage in deciphering meanings of the intertextuality in the adverts themselves. It can be seen as an interactive exercise between the adverts and the audience. The ability to do this intellectual game correctly invokes a sense of pride and belonging in the audience.

These adverts are reality based in that they show real people (celebrities) in real life settings saying or doing something which reinforces a certain ideology held by the society. The ability of viewers to understand the intertextuality in these adverts shows that they understand the rituals and cultural beliefs of the original intentions of the adverts. Across the three adverts is the identification of intertextual devices and the relation of the intertextual message as intended by the adverts evoked correct interpretations from viewers. From the three adverts, it is apparent that the commonly used intertextual device is the use of celebrities as spokesmen performing daily bits and pieces of life activities. The analyses also reveal that a whole lot of symbolic codes appear in all the three adverts as a mark of modern advertising communication.

The notion of imitation could be seen in the intertextuality of the three adverts as celebrities used are subtly portrayed to be imitated. In line with this observation, most post-modern descriptions of intertextuality focus on the influence of the text on the reader or viewer rather than on the author’s influence (Woller, 2001).

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Adebola Adebileje  
Redeemer's University  
College of Humanities  
Department of English  
KM 46, Lagos-Ibadan Express Way, Redemption Camp  
Mowe  
P.M.B. 3005, Redemption Post Office  
Ogun State  
Nigeria  
[bolaomolara@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bolaomolara@yahoo.co.uk)

Tolulope Adebileje  
Department of English  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Ibadan  
Ibadan, Oyo State  
Nigeria  
[vickeybill@yahoo.com](mailto:vickeybill@yahoo.com)

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