

Stories Of A Self-Made Continent:

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Reality Culture and Consumer Buying Habits in Sub-Saharan Africa

African "reality shows" have an international appeal that extends beyond the continent's boundaries, attracting contenders from all over the world.

They show Africa's increasing influence across the globe.

And despite all the heavily scripted realities, these shows are also telling African stories, from an African point of view, helping to build the new image of the continent, as well as an opportunity to create a stronger African identity.

Commercial opportunities

Reality shows bring new ways of developing a new African identity that reinforce Africa's growing confidence on the world stage. Excessively scripted realities can also have the opposite effect of promoting false ideas and prejudice about people.

The fact that many realities from Africa have a worldwide appeal shows the overwhelming changes the continent is currently undergoing, attracting more inward investment and readiness to do business on the continent.

Background

Reality Shows offer African talent a gateway to the world stage simultaneously promoting the region as a stable continent full of opportunities for investment at different levels, while its middle class base keeps growing steadily. Aware of this, President Mugabe from Zimbabwe personally congratulated the latest co-winner of Big Brother Africa in 2011, Wendall Parson who shared the prize with Nigerian Karen Igbo.

Zimbabwe's Prime minister Tsvangirai said in a statement:

"Throughout his 90-day stay in the House, Wendall showed the true Zimbabwean spirit of humility, courage, dignity and peace," expecting Wendall's victory would send a clear message to the world "that this country is ready to do business," added. Tsvangirai is also aware of the potential of these competitions to confirm the country's recuperated stability after years of political turmoil.

The fact that Wendall is of white origin does not pass unnoticed. Writing about Big Brother in Africa, the blog Africanarguments.org says: "The 6th season of Big Brother Africa highlights the country's complex racial and political environment", an idea that can be extrapolated to the whole continent. Another Zimbabwean Big Brother participant, Vimbai Mutinhiri talking about a new African generation said youngsters "Need to dare to dream. That's how successes are created." And that is what reality shows in Africa encourage, while sending a message to the world that Africa's millennial generation creates its own narrative and is able to inspire the world.

Exploring cultural diversity

Cultural diversity challenges can be overcome and bridges developed by way of a positive reality show like South Africa's Culture Shock where members of different families from completely diverse backgrounds swap places. Spread over 18 one-hour episodes, Culture Shock focuses on two different families in each episode, tracking how two members from each of the families adjust to a completely foreign environment.

Talking to media news channel Mzansi Magic, commissioning editor Nirvana Singh said, "We all know that the Rainbow Nation is as multicultural as it gets and there are times, like during the 2010 World Cup or the recent Rugby World Cup, when you feel a real coming together of all citizens. But the reality is that many people find it hard to accept the traditions and practices of a culture that's different to theirs and Culture Shock aims to put that in the spotlight, through a highly entertaining reality television that may just bring us all closer together."

Three African-American women return home

A reality show about the lives of three of Nelson Mandela's granddaughters that will also be seen in the United States this year was completed last autumn. Talking to the press about it, director Graeme Swanepoel said: "This is about three women... breaking away from the [Mandela] legacy to find their own feet." The three women (Dorothy Adjoa Amuah, Zaziwe Dlamini-Manaway and Swati Dlamini) grew up in the United States but had decided to return to South Africa.

As with any reality show, this one has also been received with a fair deal of scepticism. Clutchmagonline, an American web magazine mainly targeting "women of colour" asks readers whether they would be interested in watching it and most

answers are positive, hoping that it will offer a different view on Africa. However, people are also concerned about the fact that these shows are heavily scripted in order to satisfy audience ratings.

Journalist Ronda Racha Penrice says:

“Because reality television has produced very few thought-provoking, great television moments, especially when it comes to black women, there are obvious concerns.”

However the producers said the show would take an unscripted look at the role of the new generation of women as mothers and career women .

Similarly at a press conference Dorothy Adjoa Amuah said:
"We're definitely not the African Kardashians."

Amuah, with a law degree, will be joined by her older sister, Zaziwe, who has three children and is involved in a family business, and Swati, a single mother with interests in charitable ventures. "We are exposing Africa for what it is ... with a new middle class of intellectuals ... contributing to the economy," Amuah added.

Illustrating Amuah's point is Euromonitor International's report on African future demographics depicting Africa as the world's least urbanised continent but also the one with the fastest rate of urbanisation. The average annual rate of urban population growth in the Middle East and Africa between 2000 and 2010 stood at 3.3%, compared to 2.7% in the Asia Pacific region, 1.7% in Latin America, 1.3% in North America, 0.9% in Western Europe and -0.1% in Eastern Europe.

The African format is going global

The first reality shows to attract Africans from all over the world started in 2009 with Kenya's "Africa's World Best talent (AWB) show". It gathered people coming from around 60 different countries across the world and was shown in 52 African countries, as well as Europe and the USA. In a press release from AWB, producers said it is a show about Africans by Africans. Also AWB's founder Pauline Long said that there is a need to recognise African talent worldwide and to give back to the continent by encouraging the establishment of sustainable youth projects.

Similar projects with an international dimension have followed with a fair deal of success. In 2012, it is expected that African satcaster Trend TV will run an international version of their show "Make Me a Success".

Talking to International publishing company C21, Trend TV executive director Fathia Plange said, "It's an educational and entertaining programme that really helps a lot of unemployed people and people in recession to give them a whole new perspective on life."

The series, which will be shot in Nigeria, will then air on Trend TV's recently launched, free-to-air pan-African channel CTL Africa. Plange also expects a pan-African version of the show to follow, with contenders from across the continent. The firm will also try to sell their new talk show about entrepreneurs and successful Africans from around the globe.

Disney is also producing a Pan-African show called Shake It Up: Dance Dance, for children between eight and 14. Anyone who is a resident of Africa and in that age range can enter the competition. Disney has engaged South Africa's most popular radio DJs and "South Africa's Got Talent" host, Anele Mdoda as judge, to encourage kids to get involved.

Cooking shows, the latest African realities

2011 saw a proliferation of cooking shows across Africa. In South Africa, two are currently ongoing: the LG Life Tastes Good Cooking Championship and the "Come Dine With Me South Africa". In these programmes, contenders and viewers are inspired and given a new and healthier approach to cooking. LG's Head judge Jenny Morris explains that recipes should be low in fat content, without compromising on taste, skill, presentation and creativity. Cooking shows once again explore the continent's cultural diversity. "Take masala, for instance. Every house has masala, but no two dishes taste the same," Morris says.

Such programmes not only can help develop new eating trends, they might also bring social transformation. "I certainly think it has inspired people. We are talking about healthier options. It is also a way for people to save money and entertain at home. Also, men even make an effort to clean the kitchen," Morris says with a laugh.

Outlook

Republished with permission from Euromonitor Market Research Blog, originally posted on Africa is fundamentally a young continent. Reality TV shows explore certain underlying values of a new generation with an ever-growing purchasing power. Even in cases like South Africa where, according to Euromonitor International, severe income inequality persists, consumer expenditure is still expected to rise strongly by 42.2% in real terms over 2011-2020, while the poorer households will expand spending more rapidly than the richer ones across most expenditure categories.

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