

Mobile and digital trends in 5 African countries: a cultural interpretation

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As part of a multi-national mobile and digital insights gathering project for mobile agency, Yonder Media, I was commissioned to gather cultural and behavioural insights in five African countries: Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia.

This piece addresses the intersections between technology and culture that I identified while doing fieldwork. Therefore, this is not the result of strict data analysis, but rather the outcome of an immersion in each of these cultures.

Context of technology usage across countries

Common to all countries visited were their booming economies. It is evident that these have triggered a number of socio-cultural changes that influence the uptake of mobile and digital technologies. I will only address those that were obvious to me while I conducted the observations.

As a result of economic growth, business activities have expanded and people now engage in a range of entrepreneurial ventures. Owning small businesses in transport, tourism or the import/export industry, and engaging in occasional informal commercial deals, are a few of the activities which people refer to as "business." One of the consequences of this informal economy is the fact that some business men and women commute for commercial purposes and connect with wider networks of people within and outside their homes, or even their countries.

When looking at how they currently use technology, the obvious fact is that the interactions with mobile devices become very specific in regards to needs and lifestyle.

Perceptions of mobile technology

Connected to the above trend of mobility and commuting, some common beliefs, or ideas about mobile technology include:

- Operating systems that allow cheaper internet browsing (i.e. Blackberry, Android),
- Devices with access to instant messaging platforms and multi SIM cards, and
- Devices with a long lasting battery life.

The above insights are not statistically proven facts but they are changing the mobile landscape in these countries.

For instance, those who engage in commercial activities tend to have an email account, engage on Facebook or even Skype, and are able to browse the internet on their phones. On the other hand, mobile instant messaging platforms are crucial to those who commute and leave their families behind.

This pattern of behaviour differs from that of people aged 40+ who have different kinds of jobs (i.e. government officer or desk jobs). Depending on what they do for a living, they have smaller social networks than those of the first group of people. The latter influences levels of engagement with mobile social platforms. Those with desk jobs rely less on mobile technology to interact with and connect to others. They may connect with a smaller number of people than those who have jobs that require them to commute a lot.

Further, people who are older and have desk jobs tend to rely less on mobile technology because they need it less when doing their jobs, and because they belong to smaller offline social networks. They don't move around a lot and they are closer to their families hence they use mobile platforms such as instant messaging and Facebook less than those who commute and have a mobile lifestyle.

Main patterns and drivers of behavior

As highlighted earlier, the interest in operating systems and mobile devices is increasing amongst a more educated segment of mobile users in these countries.

This must be interpreted cautiously however, as there are behavioural differences amongst those who are digitally savvy. Digital savvy users are more knowledgeable about the way in which mobile devices operate, and keep up to date with the latest technology and gadgets.

Nonetheless, a portion of this group, despite having an understanding of how mobile technology works, choose to use only some applications, social networks and mobile services. Despite being informed, some of them did not engage with a number of platforms.

For instance, the way in which Facebook is used in different countries is seen as a threat to privacy. This was discussed with people in the context of infidelity and exposure of their intimate affairs.

The above had nothing to do with digital literacy levels but with individual, and at times, cultural influences (i.e. religious/moral background, closed off societies, more affinity with tight social networks in their communities than with bigger and wider networks of unknown individuals, etc.)

Another reason behind this ambiguous use of platforms could be something I call a lack of 'emotional attachment' with a product(s).

In general, technology users own and aspire to own technology that either makes their lives easier, or guarantees efficient connectivity with their family and friends. Of course, the latter is highly emotional, but it seemed more co-related to phone calls than other platforms. Instant messaging and social networking usage, despite being cheaper (functional) is not necessarily seen as efficient, or reliable (functional-emotional).

This is a generalisation, but the majority of these countries had mobile network problems. As a result the use of multiple SIM cards, or various mobile devices with each of the existent networks per country is common.

In this context, sending instant messages or even SMS is not as efficient as calling someone. When phoning, there is always the gratification of an immediate response (emotional), which is not guaranteed when sending a text message.

Uncertainty and immediacy

The above points out a sense of immediacy that prevails amongst avid mobile phone users. This behaviour is not restricted to a specific group of individuals. I met those who moved in small circles of people and had a full-time job. I also talked to

those who needed their phones in order to communicate with clients. In both situations the urgency of speaking to others was common.

Interpreting this can be quite universal (immediate gratification), but from a different perspective it may have to do with their local realities.

The situations prompting urgency include:

- Traffic issues that cause delays, accidents, and emergency situations
- Long distances to the city centres
- Lack of work in some areas which prompts people to look for business opportunities in other parts of the city or country
- Leaving the village to live in the city
- Community leadership activities (i.e. to announce meetings in a community group), and
- Need to do banking and transferring money or getting cash quickly, as the majority of payments are made with cash

The future and cultural change

While I analysed the data gathered during fieldwork common themes that were connected with one another became clearer. Something that stood up for me was what seems to be at the core of technology usage: there is always something coming up that is better than what people currently own, or what they could aspire to (a smart phone, a tablet, a newer version of their current mobile device(s)), etc.

History has demonstrated that as much as the humans' environment keeps changing, users adopt technology changes at their own pace. The speed at which digital evolution is happening in these countries is proportional to cultural perceptions of change.

Because the internet service is still slow, networks are not always reliable, devices are still unaffordable by some, and tablets are still inaccessible by many, digital change is relatively slow. However, there is a level of awareness of this evolution amongst users and, more importantly, there is a very clear emotional connection to the most recent, innovative and upcoming mobile/digital technologies.

Various cultural practices are not as progressive as technology adoption is. Practices such as: socialising with friends, family functions, Sundays, game viewing, amongst others, change at a slower pace.

Last consideration

From this viewpoint and irrespective of access, symbolically, devices and digital technology show individuals how their context and environment change. They seem to embrace this change locally (i.e. commute and stick to phone calls, watch news but check updates on football from phone, combine use of instant messaging and calls, etc.)

Local transformation does not come without challenges, which in my view include:

- Culturally there seems to be a contradiction between taking things as they come and focusing on the present moment, and the aspirations to what is yet to come. For instance, as much as future planning is non-existent for some, there is an obvious aspiration to attain material goods and newest and innovative technologies in the future. There is awareness of what is coming next, and therefore the vision of a future is foreseen in regards to digital and mobile trends.
- Synchronicity: the pace at which things change does not always coincide with the pace at which people adapt to social transformations, and
- External influences including politics, economic changes, and comparing themselves to other African countries and the rest of the world.

The main insight to feed into mobile and digital strategies is to either adapt to the speed of these transformations, or to speed up behaviour change in a local context that adapts greater technological/social transformations to local needs and aspirations.

ABOUT MARCELA OSPINA

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