

Identity in Nigerian hip-hop music

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Abstract - Nigerian hip hop music genre has been explored with different thematic foci. However, not much attention has been given to how hip-hop artistes in the country create and project different identities for themselves through the ideologies expressed in their songs. This study, therefore, within the purview of Critical Discourse Analysis, investigates how hip-hop artistes in Nigeria create and exhibit different identities through the ideological orientations displayed in their songs. Findings reveal Nigerian hip hop artistes, through their lyrics, create and project themselves as theists, custodians of culture, and a people with a rich linguistic repertoire.

Keywords: Nigerian hip-hop, identity, marketing strategies

1. Introduction

Language, to a great extent, makes human existence worthwhile. One wonders what living in the human society would have been like without language. Among the various functions, language performs in human society is serving as a means of identity and creating identity. Individuals' identities can be traced to language usage in discourse, and the projection of supposed ideas (ideologies) as individuals and groups cannot totally be divorced from language. This explains why language scholars and sociologists have submitted that no linguistic construction exists in isolation and independent of ideology. Language use in the Nigerian music industry, particularly the hip-hop music genre, has gained the attention of language scholars, home and abroad. These scholars, especially sociolinguists have been interested in language-related innovations in Nigerian hip hop music, in terms of its grammar, lexicon and style. Works on language use in Nigerian hip hop music include Omoniyi (2005), Omoniyi et al (2009), Adegoke (2011), Liadi and Omobowale (2011), Omoyele (2011), Ajayi (2012), Ajayi and Filani (2014), Gbogi (2016), Ajayi and Bamgbose (2018), and Akinrinlola et al (2024), to mention but a few. Omoniyi (2006) submits that the linguistic landscape of the Nigerian hip hop music is a reflection of the linguistic situation in the country. He observes that code alternation features predominantly in Nigerian hip hop music. He sees this linguistic strategy as a means by Nigerian hip hop artistes to resist the dominance enjoyed by American hip



hop music and culture on the Nigerian hip hop scene. Omoniyi's observation is a valid one. However, we argue that in addition to Omoniyi's claim the use of code alternation by Nigerian hip hop artistes is not only a means of resisting the dominance of American hip hop style and culture; it is also a strategy to create a particular sense of *Nigerianness* by Nigerian hip hop artistes.

Again, Omoniyi et al (2009) argues that Nigerian hip hop artistes make light reference to sex in their songs. However, we find this submission unacceptable. This is because one of the predominant features of Nigerian hip hop music that make the genre of music somewhat acceptable to the Nigerian youth is the practice of (un)veiled reference to sex and sensitive parts of the body. In fact, Ajayi (2012) considers the position as overgeneralisation. Adegoke (2011) opines that code switching in Nigerian hip hop music is not only a strategy to resist the influx of the American culture in the Nigerian music industry, but also a means to demonstrate creativity. He concludes that this could also result from the low level of proficiency many Nigerian hip hop artistes have in the English language. Liadi and Omobowale (2011) conclude that code alternation is a major phenomenon responsible for the increasing patronage Nigerian hip hop music enjoys among Nigeria youths. Omoyele (2011) examines the use of Nigerian Pidgin English and Nigerian indigenous languages in the Nigerian hip hop music and submits that the use of these codes by Nigerian hip hop artistes is to create and construct a national and linguistic identity among Nigerian youths.

Ajayi (2012) investigates how Nigerian hip hop artistes engage in verbal warfare through their songs. Accordingly, Nigerian hip hop artistes employ language to promote rivalry and self-aggrandisement among themselves. Ajayi and Filani (2014) examine the pragmatic function(s) of pronouns in Nigerian hip hop music. They note that Nigerian hip hop artistes strategically employ the use of pronouns to associate or identify with their fans and followers on the one hand, and dissociate themselves from perceived enemies and rivals, on the other. Gbogi (2016) explores slang and slangifying in the Nigerian hip hop music genre. He notes that many slangy expressions found in the language practice of contemporary Nigerian youths owe their origin to Nigerian hip hop and their artistes. Ajayi and Bamgbose (2018) explore the lyrics of selected Nigerian hip hop artistes within the purview of Yoruba *omoluabi*. They observe that the (non)linguistic practice of Nigerian hip hop artistes, as evident in the lyrics of their songs, contravene the principles of Yoruba *omoluabi*; a development strongly linkable to the many social vices noticed among contemporary Nigerian youths. Akinrinlola et al (2014) demonstrate how Nigerian hip hop artistes promote social vices, especially cybercrimes and criminality through their songs. Essentially, these studies have done justice to some critical issues as far as the discourse of Nigerian hip hop is concerned in the Nigerian context. However, none of the works has emphasised how Nigerian hip hop artistes project different identities in their songs, to appeal to the emotional sense of the fans and followers, and as a pragmatic marketing strategy. This is a fundamental that this study aims to establish.

Identity refers to the characteristics of determining or portraying a close similar affinity of an institution whose features could be determined from certain behaviour. It is a pure construct of an individual and may not reflect any reality (Jacob, 2008:507). Identity reflects the social, cultural, religious, etc. features of a person such that these distinct features would serve as a reference to distinguish the person in question. In the sub-field of sociolinguistics, many scholarly works have examined identity in relationship with linguistic, economic and social situations. Some of these works are Goffman (1967), Gibson (2004), and Korth (2005). Goffman (1967) examines the concepts of identity and face. He sees face as the self-image individuals project in public discourse. It is the recognition of this self-image of specific individuals that establishes their consciousness of their identity. Goffman opines that identity is the way of identifying us, and how we identify ourselves.



Gibson (2004) gives more insights on the definition of Goffman, claiming that the speaker can influence the way the other sees them, but ultimately, the speaker's identity is formed by the hearer and this identity may be entirely different from the speaker's desired identity. This situation is said to pose a conflict which is exacerbated if the hearer is in a position of power and is capable of imposing a certain image on the speaker. Gibson (2004) studies identity and acculturation and explains that acculturation and identity have a reciprocal relationship which involves the process of adaptation along two vital dimensions. He asserts that the first-dimension deals with the values and behaviour of a receiving culture while the second deals with the retention of values and ideas. Also, Korth (2003) stresses the tendency among bilinguals to identify with a group whose language they speak, and in this way highlights a mixed or heterogeneous identity. He further explains that the languages involved in this code switch represent identity, actually preferred by the individuals; hence the use of multiple languages in conversation has implications for convergence and divergence.

Music is the art or science of combining vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) to produce beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion. During the act, dancing, clapping or other gestures are included. Music performs so many functions and this makes it to be embraced by many and in recent time, there is no form of music that does not include dancing or other kinds of gestural expression. Today, hip hop music is one of the fashionable means through which globalization spreads across the world. According to Ajayi (2012), hip hop as a music genre started in the mid-1970s in South Bronx and then northeast (New York). It is a genre of music that has its culture, as reflected in the dressing style, language culture and generally in the lifestyle of many youths across the globe. It is a brand of music that evolved when DJs in New York began to isolate the percussion break from funk or rock songs so that the audience could dance to it.

Commenting on the definitional fuzziness of hip hop, Shani (2004) submits attempts to define hip-hop have been a challenging task. This is informed by the fact that different scholars have different orientations about the phenomenon. Boyd (2003), for instance, sees hip hop as a testament to the strength of the oppressed and it has continued to become a veritable tool often employed to overcome the obstacles that American life often imposes on inner-city urban communities, most especially the youth.

Rose (1994) says:

Hip hop is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African American and Caribbean history, identity, and community. It is the tension between the cultural fracture produced by post-industrial oppression and the binding ties of black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame for the development of hip hop (cf Ajayi, 2012: 4).

Following the opinion of Rose (1994), Westbrook (2002:64) sees hip hop as:

The artistic response to oppression. A way of expression in dance, music, word/song. A culture that thrives on creativity and nostalgia. As a musical art form, it is stories of inner-city life, often with a message spoken over beats of music. The culture includes rap and any other venture spawned from the hip hop style and culture



However, a critical appraisal of the evolution of hip hop in Nigeria reveals this genre of music could not have emerged as a protest against oppression or marginalisation. It is a brand of music that surfaced in the Nigerian music space as a result of creativity on the part of Nigerian hip hop artistes. It is a genre of music in the country that features a mixture of the American and Nigerian indigenous cultures. This mixture of the African American and Nigerian cultures is perhaps what has made this genre of music have immeasurable influence on many youths in the country (Ajayi & Filani, 2014).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) forms the analytical framework for this study. CDA views language as a social construct, showing how discursive events influence the context in which they occur and how the context in turn influences the discursive events. CDA adopts a more social aptitude to show how language through its discursive elements is central to the formation of subjectivity and structures of inequality (Fairclough, 1989; 1995). In the opinion of van Dijk (1998), CDA is a field that is interested in studying and analysing written and spoken texts to show or depict the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality and bias. This field of study equally examines how the said discursive sources are maintained and reproduced within specific social, political and historical contexts (Ajayi, 2016). Similarly, Fairclough (1992) contends that CDA is a discourse analysis approach which is primarily concerned with how to systematically explore often covert relationships of causality and determination between discursive practices, events and texts, on the one hand, and wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes on the other, with a bid to examining how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power. From the above, it then suffices to submit that the goal of CDA is to make transparent the connections or relationships between discourse practices, social practices, and social structures.

2. Method

Data for this study comprised lyrics of five randomly selected songs featuring eight popular and linguistically creative Nigerian hip hop artistes. These artistes have distinguished themselves in the Nigerian music industry, particularly in the hip hop music genre, having been in the industry for not less than ten years. The artistes were Lil Kesh; Tiwa Savage; Harrysong; Olamide, 9ice, Asa; Kaycee and Inyanaya. The selection of the sampled songs was done from the pool of numerous hip hop songs by several Nigerian hip hop artistes initially listened to. From observations, the linguistic practice of Nigerian hip hop artistes that forms the thematic focus of this study is a common feature of all the songs, thus five have been randomly sampled to avoid repetition. The specific songs from which data were elicited were *Reggae blues* (Harrysong featuring Olamide, Kaycee and Inyanaya), *Semilore* (Lil Kesh), *Eleda Mi O* (Olamide), *Olorun mi* (Tiwa Savage), and *Petepete* (9ice featuring Asa) Data, as constituted by relevant excerpts from the selected songs, were transcribed and subjected to the principles of critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1998).

2.1 Data Presentation and Analysis

This section is devoted to data presentation and discussion. For systematicity, the various forms of identity identified in the data are discussed one after with the linguistic choices used in their creation.

2.2 Theistic identity

Several studies, including Adejumo et al (2015), Chukwuma (2017), and Ajayi (2020), have established the fact that Nigerians are a very religious lot. In other words, to demonstrate their sense



of theism, most Nigerians identify with one religion or the other. Among the numerous religions in the world, Lamidi (2016) identifies Islam and Christianity as the main religions recognised by the Nigerian State. He claims that the third (Traditional Religion) is socially but not officially recognized. However, it is noted that there are some other ideological movements that have religious intricacies in the country. These include the Grail Message, Eckanker, and the Guru Maraji, among others. Nigerian hip hop artistes' religious inclinations and identities could easily be noticed in their lyrics, as they often make allusions and references to God in their lyrics. The excerpts below showcase instances of theistic identities reflected in our data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Excerpt 1

Ó da ẹ jẹ ka fògo f'ólúwa ò,

People let us give glory to God

Yeh yeh yeh

Because we pop champagne we pop meet today

Because we go sayé we go troway today

Because we will enjoy so much today

Torípé o ẹ mí lóre mé le gbàgbé oo (4ce)

Because he has done me favour

Bàbá ẹmí lore mé le gbàgbé oo (4ce)

Father (God) has done me a favour I can't forget

Lil Kesh (Semilore)

In the above excerpt, the artiste's composition is highly woven around theism, as the lyrics of the song centre on the acknowledgment of God, thanking and praising Him for what He has done. In the song, Lil Kesh projects the Christian ideological stance that God is the source of anyone's success in the world, including himself. Although no part of the song overtly refers to Christ or Christianity, making recourse to the tenets of CDA, particularly around the notion of language constituting a social practice (van Dijk, 1998), helps reveal the artiste's identification with Christianity, hence the projection of his theistic cum Christianity identity. For instance, the church-like manner of the rendition of the song and the use of lexical items such as *Oluwa*, *ògo*, *bàbá*, which are common choices in the vocabulary of Yoruba Christians in Nigeria (see Ajayi, 2015), depict the religious identity and inclination of Lil Kesh as a Christian.

By creatively importing these 'Christianity elements' into the lyrics of the song, the artiste hopes to appeal to the emotional sense of fellow Christians, particularly Yoruba Christians, for social acceptance. This becomes expedient in view of the public perception of hip hop artistes, particularly in Nigeria as people without the knowledge of God (perhaps in view of their somewhat questionable lifestyle, when weighed on the scale of biblical doctrine). This practice (of importing church or religious lexemes into hip hop lyrics) has now become very common among many contemporary hip hop artistes in Nigeria, and it has been strategically deployed by them to subtly 'close' the imaginary ideological chasm between the church and the social worlds. In fact, contrary to what used to be the practice, in recent times, on account of this strategic linguistic practice, some Nigerian hip hop artistes have got invites to perform in Christian gatherings and churches (see Ajayi and Lawal, 2025).



A similar linguistic practice is observed among artistes who identify with Islam, as evident in the excerpt below as extracted from Olamide's song

Excerpt 2

Ma kòle, ma ra'le

I shall own a land and build a house

ma a lowo se, ma a ni moto

I shall have enough money and own a car

ma segun oso, ma segun ota

I shall conquer my enemies the wizards enemy...

...we wey wear dunlop

those of us wearing dunlop slippers

Olorun je ki a se konge ire

may God lead us to encounter favour

Wabiilliahi Taofeeki (Islamic recitation)

may God lead us to encounter favour

Olamide (Eleda Mi O)

Just like Lil Kesh in the previous excerpt, Olamide brings in elements of Islam in his song, through his reference to the Arabic phrase/expression *Wabiilliahi Taofeeki* which translates as 'may God lead me to encounter favour' to evidently demonstrate his identification with Islam. The expression is an Arabic prayer that shows the artiste believes in God as the one that directs the affairs of humans, including ensuring they come in contact with favour and fortune in life. The inference that one can draw from this is that these artistes, while exhibiting or displaying hip hop culture largely believed to be 'anti-order' still recognise the place of God in their activities and daily lives; hence they are 'godly' in their own way.

3.1.1 Cultural identity

Cultural identity refers to elements that constitute an outlook belonging to a cultural referent of a certain group of people. It is often a part of oneself conception and self-perception in relation to one's culture. There are so many cultures in Nigeria; hence the nation can be described as a multi-ethnic-cum-cultural society with diverse cultural aesthetics. The hip hop artistes in Nigeria hail from different cultures of the country, hence their exhibition of distinct and different cultural identities representing their different cultural groups. Within the spheres of culture, there are norms and values that are clearly understood by native speakers; people in a given cultural environment exhibit these features in their relationship with people within or outside their cultural environment. These cultural cum identity norms are often reflected in the songs of many hip hop artistes in Nigeria. Let us consider excerpt 3, for instance:

Excerpt 3

Pètè pètè t'a nà ní pòpá

The muddy water beaten with a stick

Èni to bá tabà, kó ma fi binu, ko lọ tun be se ni...

whoever is affected should not be angry but such should adjust

Ş'èbè lẹ ma sùn



Are you going to sleep there

Tẹbá sọ pé ẹ o mọ nńkan kan
If you claim you don't see anything

Ẹyìn àrò lẹ ma wà
You will be behind the fireplace

Mẹwa ní sẹlẹ o
A lot is happening

S'ebe l'ema sun (sebe le ma sun)
Are you going to sleep there

Bi eni wo'seju akan o
Just like someone observing the crab winking its eyes

Eyin aro l'em a wa a (mewa n sele o)
You shall be behind the fireplace

9ice featuring Asa (Petepete)

The excerpt above is mainly in Yoruba, and the artiste, being Yoruba, displays the use of a series of loaded expressions to achieve certain pragmatic goals in line with the practice among the Yoruba. It is a common phenomenon in the Yoruba communication system to employ the use of loaded expressions such as parables, idioms and witty sayings to correct, condemn and lampoon social and political maladies in the society (Odebunmi, 2008; Ehineni, 2016; Bolaji and Kehinde, 2017); which the artiste, 9ice, has demonstrated in this song. Many artistes have equally adopted this language practice to project their cultural identity and beliefs. Sometimes, as a demonstration of their cultural beliefs, some of these artistes go as far as embellishing their songs even with incantations. In excerpt 3, the artiste resorts to the unconventional use of language to embellish his criticism against the untoward political atmosphere of the country. He feels he could achieve his aim, without being necessarily tagged apolitical, through the use of this language manipulation. This is achieved with the preponderant use of cultural elements such as proverbs, idioms and axioms to demonstrate his intentions. For instance, the axiom '*Pètẹ̀ pètẹ̀ t'anà ní pòpá, Ẹni to bá ta bà, kó ma fi binu, ko lẹ tun be se ni*' is a proverbial statement in Yoruba that is often used as a preface to or part of a statement carefully deployed by an individual to pointedly address an untoward situation in a particular context. Similarly, *Eyin aro*, as used by this artiste, is a metaphoric phrase that denotes 'a dishonourable state/or position' in Yoruba, and as such an individual so discursively projected as staying 'behind the fireplace' *Eyin aro* is indirectly being told they have lost their honour and as such shameless or not considered respectable in the society. Resorting to this proverbial and indirect castigation of his objects of 'verbal attack' portrays the artiste as one who does not only have linguistic competence in the language but one that also demonstrates communicative competence in the language.

3.1.2 Linguistic identity

Linguistic identity refers to the sense of belonging to a community as mediated through the symbolic resource of language. This has to do with the preferred language used by an artiste or artistes. Ansaldo (2010: 617) argues that linguistic identities are shaped by the "plurality of linguistic codes." In our data, there is a clear observation of some linguistic patterns which serve as an indication of the linguistic repertoire of the artistes. There are linguistic elements such as code-mixing (switching),



lexical borrowing (outside the artiste's social identity), slangs, proverbs and idiomatic expressions. From the lyrical presentation of each artiste's songs, one could easily predict the linguistic identity(ies) of the artistes. This explains why some Nigerian indigenous languages such as Yoruba and Igbo, feature in the lyrics of many Nigerian hip hop artistes. It is also a common phenomenon among Nigerian artistes to mix Nigerian Pidgin with their respective indigenous languages. This, as argued by Adegoke (2011) and Liadi and Omobowale (2011), is a deliberate strategy to identify with and reach out to the vast majority of Nigerian youths for social acceptance and patronage.

3.1.3 Bilingual identity

Nigerian hip hop artistes make use of different codes to pass across their messages to their audience. This practice, apart from adding to the aesthetics of their lyrics, helps the artistes showcase their linguistic prowess, as well as projecting their bilingual identities. Code alternation features prominently in the excerpts 4 to 6:

Excerpt 4

Ó da ẹ jẹ ka f'ògo f'ólúwa ooo, yeh yeh yeh
Now let us give thanks to God

Because we pop champagne we pop meet today, yeh yeh yeh

Ó da ẹ jẹ ka f'ògo fólúwa ooo, yeh yeh yeh
Now let us give thanks to God

Because we go shaye we go troway today, yeh yeh yeh
Because we will enjoy today

Torípe ó ẹ mí loore mé le gbàgbe òò(2ce)
Because He has done me favour I can't forget

Wón ní ẹ ma wo Kesh ẹ ma wo Kesh ọmọ pásítò waaa
They said look at Kesh, our pastor's son/child

Ẹ wò ó bó ẹ ma ní rap bóse ma ní kọrin
Look at how he raps and how he sings

Lóri television wa; ẹ wò ó bó ti ẹ blow tó ní ti lọ show ...
On our television, see how he has become prosperous
Tí wọ náà bá ẹ make ẹ ko o kọ'jú mó 'we...
If you to want to make it, face your studies

Lil Kesh (Semilore)

Excerpt 5

...And this time I promise to tell you how much I care
And to hold you close cause you mean everything to me dear
Ọlórún mi, gbàdúrà mi
My God answer my prayers
When you take all the ones we love
We'll carry on and it won't be long
I pray to be strong
Ọlórún mi, gbàdúrà mi...
My God answer my prayers



Tiwa Savage (Olorun mi)

Excerpt 6

Bobo see Baddo wey dem dey bu

See Baddo that was being booed

Dey bu, deybu

One that was booed

He dey tell Amokachi the bull

He is telling Amokachi the Bull

The bull, the bull

See money for floor like swimming pool

The pool, the pool

Eh dey gimme wings like Redi bull

It gives me wing like Red Bull

The bull, the bull

Baby anything you want make I do

Baby, anything you want I will do

I do, I do

I no be tiger back to my bull

I am not a tiger back to my bull

My bull, my bull

Oya now, our master oh

Now, our master

E deygbadun oh

He is enjoying

If your body touch omoge she go get belle

If your body touches a lady she will become pregnant

Harrysong ft. Olamide, Kaycee and Inyanya (Reggae Blue)

In excerpt 4, Lil Kesh switches between Yoruba, English and Nigerian Pidgin. The preponderance of Yoruba in the song, however, could point to the language as his mother tongue, a major means of projecting his identity as Yoruba. In excerpt 5, Tiwa Savage alternates the use of English and Yoruba, and very much like Lil Kesh, Yoruba features more in this particular song. In excerpt 6, Olamide mixes Nigerian Pidgin, English and Yoruba. This practice is a pragmatic self-marketing strategy by hip hop artistes in Nigeria to reach out to people and individuals outside their immediate linguistic 'world' to increase their fan base. In fact, from observation, this phenomenon is so commonplace among Nigerian hip hop artistes that it is difficult to come across hip hop songs in which artistes restrict themselves to the use of just one language.

This phenomenon has essentially projected many Nigerian hip hop artistes as possessing mixed linguistic identities. Although Adegoke (2011) has argued that the reason why code-alternation in Nigerian languages and English, for instance, features preponderantly in the lyrics of Nigerian hip hop artistes is their low level of proficiency, especially in English, we contend in this study that this practice (of code alternation) is a marketing and aesthetic strategy by them to expand their fan base. Our submission is predicated on the observation of the fact that, while it might be true that many Nigerian hip hop artistes do not have much 'formal education' and as such are not proficient in English, quite a lot of them are university and polytechnic graduates who have a good mastery of the language (English). And even if the position of Adegoke holds true for the Nigerian languages-English mixing, does it explain why the phenomenon also features among Nigerian



languages, which these artistes speak natively? It, therefore, suffices to argue that code-alternation is more of an identity-negotiating phenomenon than being a sign of lack of linguistic proficiency on the part of Nigerian hip hop artistes.

4. Conclusion

We have examined identities in Nigerian hip hop music. In particular, we have brought to the fore, through our analysis, how Nigerian hip hop artistes create different kinds of identities for themselves in their songs. We have demonstrated the fact that Nigerian hip hop artistes oftentimes display religious, cultural and linguistic identities in their songs. We argue that this practice is a marketing strategy among Nigerian hip hop artistes. Perhaps this strategy explains why many of these artistes have their fan base cutting across different categories and classes of people (the young, the old, the conservative, the liberal, the religious, and 'the not-so-religious') in Nigeria and beyond.

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