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## **Sex Sells! Could Sex Scenes in Ghanaian Video Films be used to Market Culture through Costume?**

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**Abstract.** Film, although one of the youngest art forms, influences societies due to its unique way of interacting with the viewer. Film directors employ different tropes in conveying messages to audiences. One of such tropes is costume. “Sex sells” is a popular expression in advertising and marketing communications. The purpose of this study is to offer a new perspective on how sex scenes in films could be used to project aspects of a country’s culture. Riding on this popular expression, we argue that sex scenes in a Ghanaian video film could be a strong fulcrum to expose aspects of the rich Ghanaian culture to the world. We submit that by paying particular attention to the mise-en-scene of costume used during sex scenes, directors could lure film lovers into appreciating the kinds of fabric as well as style used by characters in a film. Through the case study method, we reviewed literature on mise-en-scene of costume in film, and its ability to convey underlying messages to the viewer. The literature review serves as the basis of our argument, where we propose how to ride on costume in sex scenes to project and market the richness of Ghanaian culture regarding clothing/costume in sex scenes in films. In this regard, we have been able to problematize a new way of thinking about sex scenes in films, especially regarding sex scene costume as a unique selling proposition and its contribution to marketing a country’s culture to the viewing public. This study contributes to policy in the entertainment industry in terms of portrayal of sex scenes in Ghanaian video films while ensuring cultural adaptability and growth.

**Keywords.** Advertising & marketing communications, mise-en-scene, costume, sex scenes in film, unique selling point, Culture, Ghana.

## 1. Introduction

Film's ability to influence society in several ways, although one of the youngest art forms (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013) cannot be overemphasised. Annala (2014) opined that films are forms of audio-visual communication which inculcates costume as a vital component. According to Bateman and Schmidt (2013), broadly, it is easy to comprehend film than other forms of art due to its nature of interacting with the viewer. They further state that:

Films are constructed in ways that guide interpretation even prior to handing over the task of understanding to some viewer's 'common sense'. Films appear to more or less directly inform viewers which pieces of information have to be brought together, which not, and when (10).

Bordwell and Thompson (2013) opined that a film is a unique medium whose overall form and style incorporates many techniques to convey meanings. Arguably, films have become part of human life, and most times, if not all the time, influences how a society operates as well as reflects the culture of a people. Benadla and Yahiaoui (2016:33) defined culture as: "the characteristics and knowledge of a specific group in a country, including language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts", while Tylor (1920:44) defined culture as that "complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capacities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Tylor further stated that culture can either be a biological sign, learned or acquired. Films are able to re-echo the culture of a society through various mediums including costume (clothing).

Scholars have conducted studies on aspects of film, particularly, Ghanaian film, and have emerged with several findings. For example Murphy (2000) conducted study on the authenticity of African film, where he questions whether Africans would be the best people to give true reading of African films or people outside Africa could give better readings of African films. Meyer (2010) explored modes of portraying tradition and heritage in Ghanaian films and argued for a performative approach to tradition and heritage in Ghanaian films. Also, Harding (2003) explored how film and other media present Africa to Africans as well as to the world.

Films convey varied meanings to audiences through several means including what is known as mise-en-scene. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2013), mise-en-scene is a terminology adapted from stage play into film, and refers to the control which a film director possesses over whatever appears in a film frame. Simply, mise-en-scene means putting into a scene. Bordwell and Thompson further stated that mise-en-scene involves a lot of planning in order to carry the right message to audiences. However, aspects of mise-en-scene could be accidental, which Bordwell and Thompson (2013:212) capture in the following quote:

Mise-en-scene usually involves some planning, but the filmmaker may be open to unplanned events as well. An actor may add a line on the set, or an unexpected change in lighting may enhance a dramatic effect. While filming a cavalry procession through Monument Valley for *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, John Ford took advantage of an approaching lightning storm to create a dramatic backdrop for the action.

Mise-en-scene is capable of exceeding normal thinking of reality. Costume which forms part of mise-en-scene can convey messages to audiences overtly or covertly or both. In spite of the extant literature on African films, there is paucity in scholarship on thorough literature review on aspects of mise-en-scene in Ghanaian films, especially mise-en-scene of costume in portrayal of sex scenes in Ghanaian films as well as models for studying mise-en-scene in Ghanaian films.

The main objective of this study is to thoroughly review literature on mise-en-scene of costume in film, and its ability to convey underlying messages to film audiences. Again, we propose a model/framework for a major study which would employ thematic analysis in order to introduce how mise-en-scene of costume could propel the rich Ghanaian culture regarding sex scenes in Ghanaian films to the world.

Theoretically, the study brings to the fore a new way of thinking about sex scenes and proposes a research framework for scholars who would like to explore this area, which has arguably not received much scholarship to take advantage. The practical implication is that the study prompts film directors who hitherto paid less or no attention to sex scenes costumes to begin to find ways of riding on popular “sex sells” saying to project Ghanaian culture regarding clothing. The rest of the study is organized as follows: Literature review; Conceptual framework and proposition development; Methodology; Expected study implications; and Conclusion.

## **2. Literature review**

In order to be able to present the study in the right perspective, we reviewed literature on the following: clothing as an aspect of culture; importance of mise-en-scene in film; unique selling point; and costume as a unique selling proposition (USP) for films.

### *2.1. Clothing as an aspect of culture*

As Tylor (1920) defined culture as a complex whole, which includes art, which an individual of a society acquires, we see clothing/costume (costume would represent clothing and accessories, and can be used interchangeably in this study) as a form of art that can differentiate one society from another. According to Ikechukwu and Ogbo (2018) culture is that element which defines a people, and this makes life beautiful and interesting. They further opined that the culture of a people differentiates one group from another and this includes a kind of clothing that is or can be associated with a particular group (see Chen, 2001). Danso, Adom, Eshun, and Adamtey (2019) assert that scholars are interested in issues regarding clothing because of its strong relationship with the culture of a people. Again, Danso et al. (2019:2) states in the following quote that:

The current Ghanaian clothing and dressing styles do not reflect the traditional Ghanaian cultural values accepted by the people... the traditional Ghanaian cloths such as *Adinkra*, *Kente*, *Slit* and *Kaba* as well as *Fugu* (*Smock*), promotes Ghanaian cultural values.

Furthermore, some sub-cultures are identified through clothing. For instance, Gott's (2009:168) study found that a category of women notably in the Ashanti region of Ghana locally referred to as “preman” (a word or term associated with ‘high-time’ women, which is the local version of playman or playboy) are readily recognized by their lifestyles due to the kind of clothes they wear. Rovine (2009) is of a strong view that societies could be viewed through the eye of costume (Also see Annila, 2014; Dzamedo, 2009; Harding, 2003). With the foregoing,

costume as an aspect of culture is an ongoing discourse, and its relevance to the film industry cannot be overemphasized.

#### *2.2. Importance of mise-en-scene in film*

Films have become part of human's everyday life. Mise-en-scene is one aspect of film that has received scholarship globally (Poole, 2020; Hyangja, 2017; Mukherjee, 2011; Height, 2006). Rowe, Allan and Wells (1996:92) stated that mise-en-scene is a French word/term which literally means "having been put into the scene" describes all visual aspects that a film audience is exposed to within a shot. Bordwell and Thompson (2013) see mise-en-scene as a terminology which refers to the control a film director has over whatever appears in a film frame. They further stated the term was adapted from theatre into film. This therefore means that the importance of mise-en-scene in communicating meanings to audiences is not debatable.

#### *2.2. Unique selling proposition (USP)*

Fundamentally, the development of the unique selling proposition concept can be attributed to Reeves (1961). The approach to advertising postulates that consumers of a product would receive unique benefits from patronizing that product. This unique selling point can either be definitive or implied statements (Bao & Shao, 2002). They found that an advertising campaign which was directed at teens yielded results by enticing more favorable brand perceptions and hugely increased product trial. They therefore concluded that their findings support the Unique Selling Proposition as an effective advertising strategy. Shin (2007), in a study on Caribbean destinations concluded that marketing that is based on USP concept remains comparatively uncommon.

#### *2.4. Costume as a unique selling proposition (USP) for films*

In a study to examine the concept of icon in the context of film costumes, Annila (2014) found that film costume has the ability to change a film character's garments into meaningful and important signs for the audience, who is able to interpret the message of the film due to the audience's understanding which is hinged on culture. Further, Annila opines that film costume is a semiotic cultural image which conveys meanings – sometimes connotative in nature. Hyangja (2017) asserts that costume in film could project meanings excellently. Issues of gender differences could be well portrayed through proper costume in films (Height, 2006). Coffie (2015) found that in Akan (Ghana) films, clothes as well as their colours communicate deep meanings to people.

#### *2.5. Conceptual framework and proposition development*

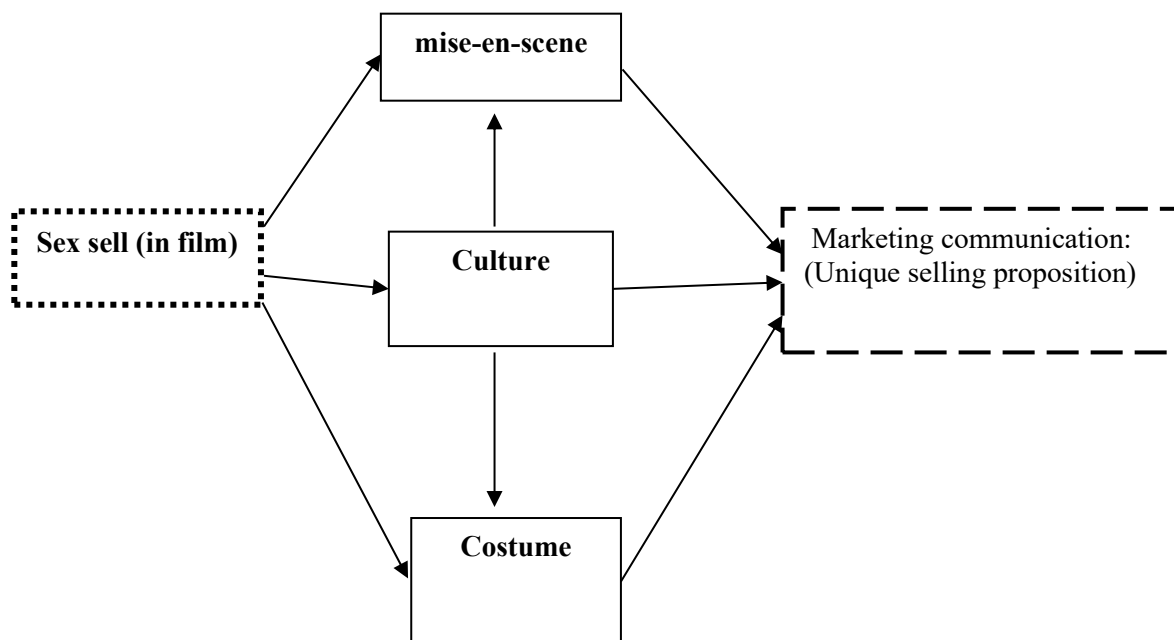
In sum, the literature review signals that the discourse on costume in film vis-à-vis its ability to communicate meanings to audiences cannot be overemphasized. We submit that costume in film, especially in sex scenes can uniquely sell a society's culture to the rest of the world, regarding clothing. This can be achieved through proper consultations by major players in the film industry by focusing special attention to costumes used in sex scenes. Leveraging on the old saying that "sex sells", film directors could use rich and unique costumes of sex scenes to direct audiences' focus on the uniqueness of costumes used in sex scenes, while riding on the sex scenes in films. It is important to acknowledge the usefulness mise-en-scene of costume in film as a unique selling point. For instance, "*kente*" (a unique Ghanaian fabric) could be used as bed linings or curtains to invoke audiences' curiosity about the aesthetic qualities of the

fabric. The benefits that would be realized from deliberating using sex scene costumes in films as USP include:

- Exposing a society’s culture to other parts of the world;
- Creating awareness of uniqueness of a country’s culture regarding clothing;
- Encouraging people within a culture to appreciate their rich culture;
- Re-focusing film audiences’ perspectives on sex scenes in films to aesthetic qualities of costume.

From the literature review, it is clear that mise-en-scene of costume regarding sex scenes could serve as USP for marketing a country’s rich culture as far as clothing is concerned. From the above literature review, the authors summarize and propose a conceptual framework for the abovementioned theme for a further empirical inquiry, particularly a qualitative approach.

**Figure 1:** Proposed conceptual framework. Source; Authors’ own



We therefore propose a full-scale qualitative study, utilizing the case study method of inquiry to source rich triangulated data from film directors/producers; film script writers; film scholars and consultants. Data collected would be analyzed using Thematic Analysis, where either theme would be inductively or deductively deduced. Thematic analysis is a method for discovering, examining and reporting patterns (themes) within data.

**Proposed research design:** The following proposed framework would be adopted for the main study:

*Data collection tools/technique:* First, a semi-structured interview guide would be designed. At least twenty (20) Ghanaian film directors would be interviewed to elicit their views, ideologies about sex scene portrayal in Ghanaian films. Also, five film scholars would be interviewed. A Focus Group Discussion session would be organized for the following:

- Ten film audiences,
- Ten Ghanaian film directors,
- Twenty film studies students,
- Five film scholars/consultants.



*Method:* The case study method of inquiry would be used. According to Crowe et al. (2011), the case study approach allows for in-depth, multi-faceted explorations of complex issues (see Fidel, 1992).

*Data collection tools:* The main data collection tools would be interview guide and focus group discussions.

*Data analysis technique:* Data would be analyzed using the Thematic Analysis. First, data collected would be transcribed and coded. According to Braun & Clarke (2006:77), Thematic analysis “offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data”.

*Discussion of results:* Results would be discussed based on the themes that would emerge.

### **3. Methodology**

The focus of this study relied completely on the literature review. We utilized a document analytic approach and opinions from experts as the research technique for achieving the aim of the study in general. Relying on documents as well as related themes for the study could come across as a simple procedure to conduct this study. However, it is an excellent precursor for retrieving extant and rich information considering the scanty nature of scholarship in this area of study. This approach allowed us to access a high volume of scientific literature drawn from open-access databases such as SCOPUS, EBSCO, ERIHPLUS, Thomson Reuter’s Web of Science (WoS), Google scholar, scholarly books as well as web blogs via the use of keywords search such as mise-en-scene in film, costume in film, clothing and accessories in film, film analysis, sex in films. We were able to sift relevant literature from the irrelevant ones for the study by sourcing all literature from the above mentioned credible databases, and in particular recent research articles. For the purpose of future empirical studies and understanding, we identified the relations and conformity of research constructs through relevant literature. We submit that, this procedure gives us the due advantage of searching for the antecedents and the consequences of the proposed research theme.

Again, we hold the view that it is prudent to adopt a document analysis as our ultimate research method in this case, since it provides a diversity of study context around this theme. To sum it up, using the document analysis approach has aided the identification of relevant content related to the present theme in order to attain the proposed objective of our study; this would guide the proposed study by obtaining rich data from opinions of experts, film consultants as well as film critics who have in-depth knowledge about the subject matter. It is however, important to reiterate that the main goal of the present study is to review relevant literature with respect to the importance of using costume in a film’s sex scenes to portray a country’s rich culture from the point of view of academics. Additionally, the partial goal was to develop a proposed conceptual research framework as indicated in Figure 1. However, taken into consideration an array of extant literature, other researchers alike suggested that, a research procedure of this nature helps to identify critical themes for a given study, which thereby extends an existing knowledge to a present study (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009; Kitchenham et al., 2010).

### **4. Expected study implications**

The expected implications of the study would be discussed as follows:

#### *4.1 Theoretical implication*

Discourse around sex is not common especially in a developing country like Ghana. Film is a powerful communication tool that can project a country's culture. Costumes in sex scenes in Ghanaian films could be exploited advantageously to serve as USP for projecting Ghana's rich culture regarding clothing to other parts of the world. This study therefore problematizes a new way of thinking about sex scenes and proposes a research framework for scholars who would like to explore this area, which has arguably not received much scholarship to take advantage of the proposed study. The reviewed literature gives an overview of the relevance of costume as a trope of mise-en-scene in film so far as culture is concerned.

#### *4.2 Practical implications*

Film scholars could take inspiration from the proposed study in order to strategize effectively to contribute to knowledge in the area of using sex scene costumes to project a country's culture through a competitive marketing communication and advertisement. The study would also prompt film directors who hitherto paid less or no attention to sex scenes and costumes used in sex scenes to begin to find ways of riding on popular "sex sells" saying to project Ghanaian culture regarding clothing.

### **5. Conclusion**

We conclude based on the literature reviewed that film is a powerful communication tool that mirrors society by projecting its culture. One of the many ways of achieving this is through the creative use of mise-en-scene of costume. Although, there is extant literature on mise-en-scene, not much has been done about how mise-en-scene of sex scene costume could be used as USP in projecting a country's culture regarding clothing. The proposed framework for a full-scale study would propel a new way of thinking about sex scenes and sex scene costumes. We submit that when film directors pay extra attention to the mise-en-scene of sex scene costume, they would be able to lure film lovers into appreciating the kinds of fabric (costume) used in sex scenes for cultural adaptability and growth.

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