

Big Brother Naija Lockdown: The Nigerian Youth Populace and the Reflection of the Social Self

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Abstract

When one reflects on the day-to-day livelihood of the average Nigerian youth, it begs the question of whether Nigeria has in turn been “faithful and loyal” to its citizens when the latter have pledged to do so for the development of the acclaimed giant of Africa. Citizens, in the context of this paper, solely refer to the Nigerian youth who constitute half of the total population; with an age range that runs between 15 and 34 years. The country, though not oblivious of the agile youth as its bedrock for present and perpetual sustenance, has been unable to provide for the immediate and consequently the imminent future needs of its youth; leaving the gargantuan part of the class underemployed or unemployed, as a result of glaring, unfavorable socio-economic decisions that transcend from jaundiced political activities. Hence, the emergence of the coronavirus in December 2019 dealt a double, intense blow to the Nigerian youth who, prior to the economic wrenching pandemic, could hardly sustain himself on his paltry earnings in an inauspicious social environment. For the Nigerian youth, therefore, the Lockdown presents the opportunity for a more intense reflection of the self and social identity, such that the well-acclaimed Big Brother Naija, Season Five Lockdown Edition, sets off a social identity paradigm for the young populace.

Keywords: Big Brother Naija, BBN Lockdown, Coronavirus, Nigerian Youth, Social Self, Identity, Social Identity Paradigm

Introduction

Coronavirus is derived from corona, a Latin word that means “crown” or “wreath” (Chorba 2020). It is one of a group of related RNA viruses which is responsible for diseases in mammals (which includes humans) and birds. They cause respiratory tract infections in humans and birds which range from the mild common cold to the lethargic COVID-19.

COVID-19, which is a clipped form for “Coronavirus Disease 2019”, was first identified in Wuhan China in December 20229 and has, since, spread worldwide leading to

an ongoing pandemic that has claimed the lives of many. According to Worldometer, **2,987,871 people** have died from the coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak as of April 15, 2021. Worldometer asserts that Nigeria has recorded 164,000 coronavirus cases as at 15th of April; with 2,061 recorded dead. This has been blamed on the country's under resourced health services (Burke); an aftermath of disapproving socio-political policies that have been bemoaned by the citizens of the country for years.

On its economic implication, COVID-19 has adversely affected the global economy and financial markets. There have been records of loss of jobs and reductions in income as a result of disruptions in transportation systems as well as service-rendering and manufacturing industries. The Nigerian government has, overtime – especially at the peak of the pandemic – made some efforts in curbing the menace, which according to Nigeria Center for Disease Control started with the Italian national coming into Lagos from Milan, Italy, on February, 25, 2020. 'Adna Abu records some of these efforts as including, but not restricted to, a ban on social gatherings; a shutdown of Lagos, Abuja, and Ogun states, which are regarded as the epicenter for the Coronavirus pandemic; increase in screening at border entry points, self-isolation, social distancing of not less than 2 meters, use of hand sanitizer, and washing of hands frequently (all of which have been emphasized and publicized through formal and informal media outlets) temporary closure of schools and worship centers, among other regulations. All these measures have contributed substantially to large financial losses to many young Nigerians, especially those who have to earn daily to sustain themselves.

Ultimately, this economy decline in Nigeria has dealt a double blow to its citizens, especially the young Nigerians. There is a saying that “half [loaf of] bread is better than none”. It could then be argued that before the pandemic, the Nigerian populace's employment status had access to what could be termed as the “half bread”; with the pandemic, however, the fate of the young populace is sealed with the reality of naught. In other words, there is no “bread” at all.

The Nigerian Youth Populace and the Quest for Survival

There are many junctures to start the argument of the Nigerian youth and their survival schemes from, but let us begin with the well-acclaimed street anthem amongst

majority of young Nigerians these days – “who school epp [help]?” This opinion springs from the notion that most people end up not getting the rewards of education, especially after a tertiary education. In other words, this ultimately amounts to an individual wasting about seventy years of his life getting a formal education with the physical and financial expenses that come with it. The paramount reward would have been a well-paying job that would birth a very comfortable livelihood.

With the emerging trend of young people channeling their talents into several engagements that not only reward them financially but also make them into celebrities – a status many young Nigerians put so much efforts in to attain these days – there seems to be a sudden surge in the youth’s subscription to the philosophy of “every man for himself”, a reality where the individual has to be solely responsible for his survival in a country where governmental policies have not been favorable to a larger percentage of the Nigerian populace.

With financial pressure comes the craze amidst young Nigerians to achieve wealth by any means possible. There are reports of young adults submitting their lives to suicide as a means to appease catastrophic demands of their societies, withdrawing into the space of abject melancholia or resorting to becoming members of anti-social/anti-human associations that they believe could make all the pains disappear and enable them live their dreams; even though it is most times short lived.

In the Nigerian environment, most youth have adopted the “fast lane” means to become rich as unemployment looms. According to reports, the unemployed youth numbered about 11.1 million in 2012; subsequently averaging 21.73 percent from 2014 until 2017, attaining an unprecedented figure of 33.10 percent in the third quarter of 2017 (Trading Economics, 2018). The struggle continues.

Unfavorable lifestyles have become the trend of the moment, comprising Yahoo and its advance form, Yahoo Plus; which involves robbing people of their money through dubious internet-enabled conversations that give the individual an incognito status, as he hides behind numerous faces of unsuspecting innocents. The “plus” in the phrase refers to the ritualism that has been added to this means of survival, with unsuspecting girls; who are also in a quick search for money, falling victims. It has also resulted in some of these young people publicly displaying acts that challenge normalcy because they reportedly yield more money for them to spend at clubs and buy state of the art cars. Armed robbery, hooliganism, “blood money”,

prostitution and trafficking are, therefore, the rave of the moment amongst this class of Nigerian youths.

These heinous acts have made the older public see them as lazy and unwilling to work. In an interview session I had with the former governor of Rivers State and the incumbent Minister of Transportation, Hon. Rotimi Amaechi, at the 12th edition of The Future Awards held on December 9, 2017, at the Federal Palace Hotel, Lagos, about who is more hardworking between the old and new generation, he made a literal contrast between a Mercedes Benz and a Porsche, with the former representing the older generation and the latter representing the new. He said:

[...] Let me say that those people who buy these Porsches (the young generation) don't buy them with clean money but a lot of people who bought those (gestures) old Mercedes, struggled to get the money to buy them. Here (on the younger side) is a new lifestyle, immorality [...]. There are those who work hard to earn these kinds of rides (Porsches) but for a lot of people who own these kinds of cars, you should ask them the source of wealth [...]. There is a variation of value system: In the 50s and 60s, there was a religious value system, principles, etc., but on the younger side, anything goes [...] (The Young Nigerian (TYN) TV, 2017).

Similarly, President Muhammadu Buhari while having an interview in London, described most Nigerian youth as unwilling to do anything, but always desirous that their major facilities should come free.

Amidst all of these negative representations of the Nigerian youth, a number of them has, however, striven to come out positive, even beyond the Nigerian borders, portraying the country positively to other regions, even when the country has not offered them “anything”. These individuals have reached within themselves to dredge up their creative abilities and have solely relied on the new media to put themselves before national and international audience. The journey, for these people, did not start in a day. Some of them have been in the corners of their rooms, unnoticed, probably chastised by the older generation who felt they were being ridiculous. But they kept at it and, finally, the world discovered them. One of such

new media platforms is the reality TV show, Big Brother Naija that has, over time, empowered selected young Nigerians to attain some level of fulfillment.

Big Brother Naija

The iconic term, “Big Brother”, originated from George Orwell’s seminal novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The plot revolves around Winston Smith, the protagonist, who is a low-ranking member of the ruling Party in London, in the nation of Oceania. The Party monitors Winston everywhere he goes through telescreens, even in his home. There is a choking presence of the Party’s omniscient leader, known throughout the text as Big Brother, that is felt by the characters as they move on cautiously and almost rigidly with their daily lives. Although Big Brother makes no actual appearance in the novel, he strongly controls the loyalty of his subjects and has his presence stamped in their psyche with the slogan “Big Brother is watching you” reverberating unwavering loyalty to avoid deadly punishments.

It is on these ideals that the Big Brother Franchise was founded. The show, which is a Dutch reality competition television franchise created by John de Mol Jr., first broadcast in the Netherlands in 1999, and has over the years had many affiliations internationally. It features contestants referred to as “housemates” who are daily watched by the all-seeing eyes of Big Brother. As in the literary text, throughout their stay in the isolated house, nobody, including the housemates and the viewers, get to see or know who Big Brother is; his resounding presence is usually made known by his iconic Baritone voice. He is the channel between the producers of the shows and the contestants.

As of 21st September 2019, there have been 448 seasons of Big Brother in over 54 franchise countries and regions which include Nigeria. Formerly known as Big Brother Nigeria till its second season, Big Brother Naija is a reality television competition series that has been aired on M-Net and DStv Channel 37. Since its inception in 2006, the show has produced five seasons. The first season kicked off from 5th of March to June 4, 2006 (92 days); with fourteen housemates that included the acclaimed fashion icon and incumbent host of Big Brother Naija, Ebuka Obi Uchendu, who was evicted on the 57th day. The second season of the show titled *Big Brother Naija: See Gobbe* was not produced until eleven years after the first on 22nd January, 2017 with Efe Ejeba emerging the winner. Miracle Igbokwe won the third season of *Big Brother Naija (Double Wahala)* which premiered on January 28, 2018.

Big Brother Naija Lockdown

The fourth season of the show, *Big Brother Naija: Pepper Dem*, would witness an all-round rebranding that started off with the first production of the show in Nigeria, after lots of criticisms on its previous productions in South Africa, which the producers had argued were due to logistical reasons, one of which is the poor power supply in Nigeria. The show premiered on 30th June, 2019 with Mercy Eke, the acclaimed first female winner of the show, emerging the winner of the ₦60 million worth of prizes amidst 25 other contestants. The fifth season, *Big Brother Naija: Lockdown* premiered on 19th July 2020 with 20 housemates and lasted 71 days with Olamilekan “Laycon” Agbeleshe receiving the ₦85 million worth of prizes as the winner.

Big Brother Naija Lockdown and a Reflection of the Self for the Nigerian Youth

It is inherent in human nature to interact with others, and that is the most important factor that makes man a social being. In fact, the creation theory, otherwise known as creationism, establishes from the need to create Eve for Adam as the necessity for man to be in the company of another to thrive. Thus, the creation of Eve did not have romantic undertones *ab initio*. The Bible says “And the Lord God said it is not good that the man should be alone....” (KJV, Gen. 2.18a) The essence of this assertion is the need for an individual to be able to have a social interaction, one that helps reduce worries, helps put things more in perspective, cautions and entertains. The power of social relationship especially for social growth cannot be undermined. A scholar once argued that indeed the Babylonians would have succeeded in building the tower of Babel as recorded in Genesis 11:1-9, if not for the social disintegration sequel to God’s act of making the people not to understand one another again through instantaneous splintering of man’s hitherto single language.

Before the advent and popularity of the social media, traditional communalism, your business as the community’s business thrived. It has been argued by the older generation that the ancient communal way of living helped most people live an emotionally gratifying life, one where you could easily share your problems with the people around you, who do not necessarily have to be family; your shared environment is what makes up your family. These days, there is a lonesome trend where everyone lives for themselves, a lifestyle colloquially termed “mind your business” in Nigeria that resonates with the lyrics of Nigerian Afrobeats/Hip Hop act, Zlatan in his “Quilox” who says that the present reality is “all man

for himself". It has, however, been argued that the communality that exists among Nigerians has actually not ceded but has only moved from the physical setting to the virtual space. In other words, the social media is itself a community, where people agree and disagree on a lot of things and in recent times push some revolutionary values.

Sociologist George Herbert Mead believes that people develop self-images through interactions with other people. He argues that the Self, which is the part of a person's personality consisting of self-awareness and self-image, is a product of social experience. He delineates four ideas about how humans develop the "self":

- As against the Freudian theory of humans developing their personality through biological drives, Mead argues that the self develops through social experience.
- That this social experience is achieved through the exchange of symbols, which in the human social setting is the encoding and decoding of language to convey meaning.
- That in order to "know" ourselves, we have to see ourselves through the eyes of the others. Otherwise stated, in most cases we might not know what we are capable of unless someone else or other people trigger that action(s).
- That in seeing ourselves through the eyes of the other aids self-awareness.

Similarly, Charles Orton Cooley, in his "Theory of the Looking-Glass Self" posits that we form our self-images through interaction with other people. This "other people" he referred to as the "Significant Other" is someone whose opinions matter to us and who is in a position to influence our thinking.

Big Brother Naija has aired for four seasons before the "Lockdown" edition. However, the Lockdown edition, according to statistics, recorded the highest numbers of views, social media interaction and votes so far. According to Nobantu Shabangu of OkayAfrica, Showmax, a streaming platform, records that the collective hours streamed for the "Lockdown" edition of Big Brother Naija alone add up to almost 30 years' worth of viewing (Shabangu). Showmax is just one of many other streaming platforms Nigerians watch the show on. The Chief Executive Officer, MultiChoice Nigeria, John Ugbe, disclosed that over 900 million votes were recorded across SMS, Mobile, Website and the DStv & GOtv Apps; the first of its kind. Channel Director, Africa Magic, Wangi Mba-Uzoukwu also stated that the level of engagement for this season was off the chain (Brand Communicator).

Big Brother Naija Lockdown

The question is, what necessitated that high level of participation from the public, made up of different age groups but mainly dominated by young Nigerians? How is the young Nigerian audience the “self” and the contestants in the Big Brother House the “Other”?

Big Brother Naija Lockdown aired during the pandemic period, hence the theme “Lockdown”. It was a time when the pandemic was at its peak and most Nigerians were caved in their houses. It was a period of sobriety, of deep reflections, of anxieties, of losses, of resignation, of accepting a new, odd normal. Hence, to sit in front of your TV screen, or any other streaming platform and watch young people as yourself live out their real lives while they are also “locked up” provokes some sense of familiarity; a situation where you see yourself in another.

There were twenty young Nigerians on the show – all not above thirty – from different parts of the country and with diverse experiences. Every young Nigerian watching the show would be able to identify with, at least, one person. Within the show itself, the contestants, based on the postulations of Mead, got to see the “self” from their relationships with other people.

Twenty-six-year-old Kate “Ka3na” Jones was the first housemate to be evicted from the show. She is an entrepreneur. Introducing herself to other housemates, Ka3na revealed that she married a 64-year-old British man when she was 22 and has been married to him for four years. Besides the fact that’s she is a hard worker, her husband was also supportive, buying her a house and she felt one of the ways she could use to “compensate” him was to have a child for him. Ka3na portrays the realities of some young people, who do not have it all rosy but are adamant on attaining success and would step on anyone or anything standing in their way. She reflects the millennial young Nigerian woman who believes she can achieve greatness all by herself and stand tall amidst men and her peers; hence her appellation “Boss Lady”.

When 23-year-old Boluwatife “Lilo” Aderogba walked into the Big Brother House, the summation on social media was that she was indeed a belle to look out for. Many young people already hitched up their tents on her site because she was promising; beautiful and intelligent. She represents the sassy Nigerian girl who knows what she wants and goes for it, which explains her hook up with the macho man of the house, Eric Akhigbe. But then she suddenly started sinking, totally oblivious of why she was there, almost non-existing even to

her fellow housemates who voted her out. Lilo represents youths who know what they want but get distracted, so distracted that they fail to achieve their goals.

Tolani “Tolanibaj” Shobajo and Florence “Wathoni” Anyasi were close friends in the house and also got evicted on the same day. The two were notable for their almost relentless act in getting hooked up with a man just because it seemed everybody was getting hooked up. There were discussions on how they do not care to overthrow any lady attached to a man they liked. It was quite comic but the reality of most young Nigerians is setting out on a project because every other person is doing it, even when they do not have the necessary tools or charisma for it. For example, most young people in Nigeria want to become artistes, even when a lot are not gifted in that craft. There are other preoccupations many young people want to venture into that they have no business doing. Social media discussions and condemnations of the acts of these two could help an individual realize that they do not have to be engaged in some things because every other person is doing it; most times it does not end well just as it did not for either Tolanibaj or Wathoni.

Thirty-year-old Lucy Edet was the no-nonsense woman in the house. People – both her co-contestants and viewers – were not comfortable with her nagging attitude, but she remained in the house till the 49th day! Why? As the show progresses most people got to see the “good in the bad” of Lucy’s being: the fact that she was herself and could not bring herself to pretend that everything was okay. Lucy was never pretentious. Soon, she got her two friends, Dorathy and Prince, on the bad sides of people, because her sincerity sheds light on the latter’s acts of pretense, a development that hastened the eviction of Nelson Enwerem, the one whom the other housemates felt was definitely going to be in the house till the last day. Lucy’s sincerity, especially about her financial status after leaving the house helps boost the confidence of some young people who realized from the lifestyle of the housemate that it does not kill to be true to oneself.

The relationship between Rebecca “Nengi” Hampson and Ozoemena “Ozo” Chukwu would be remembered among the viewers for a very long time. Ozo’s persistence on having Nengi as his girlfriend and his patience when the latter hooks up with other male housemates got him insulted for the most part of the show. This attitude seems strange to a lot of young Nigerian men, and women too, who felt it was very stupid of a man to be patient in love for a woman who did not seem to care about his feelings. He was tagged a fool and, disappointingly, his mother was dragged into the drama for raising a man like that. This

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reflects on the unhealthy notions of men towards the opposite sex, a situation that has led to lots of rape cases and harassments from the male folks towards women who did not find them suitable enough to be their romantic partners. There is a choking sense of entitlement that validates a man to always have any woman he shows interest in. Hence many men “disowned” Ozo for his foolery over a woman. Subsequently, Ozo gets applauded for being a “gentleman” sustaining a positive vibe that has, since the end of the show, garnered him lots of endorsement deals from top brands.

Of utmost importance in this analysis is the massive support given to Olamilekan “Laycon” Agbeleshe by his insurmountable fan base, popularly known as Icons, made up mostly of young people. Big Brother Naija Lockdown records the first of its kind in its voting system, where Laycon garnered votes that left a gaping gap between him and the other housemates who made it to the finals. Laycon had 60% of the total votes while the remaining 40% was shared among the other four – Dorathy, Nengi, Vee, Neo – housemates who made it to the finals.

First, Laycon represents the average young Nigerian struggling to make ends meet. According to the artiste, he only came on the platform to promote his music, hoping he would at least make it to the first two weeks before eviction starts. For every week his co-housemate put him up for eviction, Laycon becomes very somber, unknown to him that he had a force that was putting everything in for him to remain in the house. Laycon reflects the “other” for a young Nigerian who is from a poor background, who regardless of his status pushes through education, toils day and night through legitimate means to make ends meet. Laycon, in the Big Brother House, represents most young Nigerians and their struggle towards self-actualization.

In addition, Laycon did not only come across as who the young Nigerian is but also who the young Nigerian wants to be. One of the tactics on the show was for most of the contestants to make their weaknesses known to get support from the viewers. Laycon never revealed on the show that he was an SC, the second most common type of sickle cell disease. When he finally revealed this in a conversation with a fellow housemate, it triggers that realization on the part of most viewers that indeed there is no excuse not to be hardworking and diligent in order to attain success.

On Laycon’s emergence as the winner, sensational Nigerian act, Korede Bello posts on his Twitter Page thus:

The psychology behind these kinds of games is that most people vote for who they see themselves in. People are drawn to contestants with a familiar story or who they share similar personality traits with. Laycon's win is for everyone who has walked in his shoes. (Bello)

Conclusion

Abraham Maslow says “if the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail”. For the random Nigerian youth, there is a struggle, caused by a failed system of government; a struggle that has affected the homes, a struggle that has pushed children not older than five to the streets. The Nigerian youth realizes that he has to tackle this struggle, at least to feed and get a shelter. Hence, they channel their qualities to achieve something meaningful. They don't have to be the best at it; they only have to be convinced that they can do it. Everybody who auditioned to be on Big Brother Lockdown knew there were people who could do it better than them but they gave it a try anyway. The rate at which Laycon was body shamed could have made him decide that he was not good enough, but he tried and he emerged the best.

At a time, and even now, the older generations see the younger generation's concentration on the social media as a waste of time. Many older people would constantly condemn the younger generation and their concentration on some TV shows. The truth is most times, it is the search for the “self” from the “other” that triggers that attention, the realization that as a young adult who is trying to attain some level of identity, there is someone going through the same struggle as you. Someone like Laycon has given many young people the courage to explore life on a bigger stage.

According to Dr. Harry Stack Sullivan, the early adolescent period is a critical time, in which the adolescent possibly finds personal worth and self-esteem under a different set of rules, not closely bound up in the strange laws of parents or society (McMahon, 112). Above all odds, young Nigerians have to grow in what they do; look out for more opportunities, learn how to get better on a global pedestal. They should be able to see ahead, see how they could, in their own ways, make the situation better. The end is what matters, not how they have started. “In every activity and undertaking, it is the end, since it is for the sake of the end that all people do whatever else they do” (Arthur, 33). This end is the moment of fulfillment, the apex of Abraham Maslow's *Theory of Needs*, which is self-actualization.

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