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What Chinese Product Design Can Teach Us About Digital Experience in Nigeria









BY

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Chinese digital product design is fascinating because many of China's most successful apps follow a different philosophy from the minimalist approach associated with Apple and much of Western product design.

I understand their central idea to be simple: make the app useful enough that users have fewer reasons to leave it. In Chinese app design, utility, speed, convenience, discovery and commercial activity often take priority over visual simplicity. This is particularly visible in apps like WeChat, Alipay, Taobao and Pinduoduo, although they don't all follow the same design philosophy.

Open some of these applications and you immediately notice the difference. More actions, products and services are visible on a single screen. Colourful icons provide direct access to popular functions. Search, payments and frequently used services are prominently positioned, while recommendations and offers sit alongside functional features. The objective is often to make the screen functionally rich rather than simply visually clean.

Alipay, for instance, approaches its homepage almost like a service dashboard, bringing financial and everyday services within easy reach. WeChat is particularly interesting because it does almost the opposite. Its primary interface is relatively restrained, while mini-programs provide access to an extensive ecosystem of services. Different approaches, but a shared interest in making the application useful beyond its primary function.

There is a fundamental difference in thinking here. Western product design has generally favoured progressive disclosure, presenting a few choices at a time and allowing users to discover more as they navigate. Many Chinese platforms make several useful choices available immediately. One approach tries to reduce what the user sees. The other often tries to reduce how much the user needs to do. Both have their merits, but I find the latter particularly interesting when thinking about the Nigerian market.

Consider how Nigerians already use their phones. A small business owner discovers customers on Instagram, takes orders through WhatsApp, receives payments through a banking app and coordinates deliveries through another platform. The customer moves between several applications to complete what is essentially one transaction. We have become quite resourceful at connecting digital services that were designed independently of one another. There is an opportunity for product designers to make these everyday journeys considerably easier.

Banking is one obvious example. Most customers open their banking applications with a specific task in mind. They want to transfer money, buy airtime, pay a bill or check a transaction. The most useful homepage is one that makes these actions immediately accessible, while intelligently introducing other relevant services. A customer who regularly pays school fees, runs a business or sends money to family members has needs that extend beyond the basic transfer function. The application should be organised around those behaviours rather than simply presenting a catalogue of the bank's products.

This thinking extends to commerce, healthcare, education, transport and public services. There is considerable value in understanding the relationship between the things people do frequently, the services they need alongside them and the opportunities to make those interactions easier. It also makes commercial sense. Applications that become useful parts of people's daily routines have more opportunities to build engagement, encourage discovery and deepen customer relationships.

Of course, copying the visual density of Chinese applications would be a mistake. A crowded screen is not necessarily a useful one. Nigeria also presents specific considerations around connectivity, data costs, device capabilities and varying levels of digital literacy. These should influence how much information is displayed, how quickly an application loads and how easily people can complete their tasks. Functional richness must come with clarity.

What interests me most about Chinese product design is the thinking behind how services are organised. The interface is treated as a living service environment, rather than simply a beautiful landing page. The real design question becomes: how much useful activity can we make effortless without overwhelming the user?

For Nigerian businesses investing in digital platforms, I think that is a very important question. We should be paying closer attention to what customers actually do, how frequently they do it and the unnecessary effort we can take out of those interactions.

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An application can be visually simple and still make life unnecessarily complicated.

Good design should make useful things easy to do.

— Chidimma Okoli