

ADVERTISING IN A MULTI-ETHNIC STATE: A CASE STUDY OF THE NIGERIAN STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study reviews existing literature on advertising in multi-ethnic contexts, with a particular focus on Nigeria—a nation of over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 languages among a population exceeding 220 million. The review identifies key factors influencing the success or failure of advertising in such a culturally diverse setting. Findings suggest that advertisements lacking cultural symbols—such as indigenous language, setting, personality, and locally relevant content—are less likely to resonate with their target audience and are therefore prone to failure. Conversely, culturally grounded advertisements that incorporate these elements are more likely to achieve success in multi-ethnic environments like Nigeria.

Keywords: Multi-ethnic, Advertisement, Cultural Symbols, Local Content, and Advertising Media.

INTRODUCTION

In today's business landscape, advertising is widely recognised as a vital tool for generating awareness about products or services, persuading consumers, and attracting potential buyers through multiple platforms, including television, radio, billboards, newspapers, magazines, handbills, posters, and digital media. As a result, organisations allocate significant financial resources to advertising, making it one of the most essential and strategic functions in the modern competitive marketplace (Rehman, Nawaz, Khan & Hyder, 2014). According to Ramaswami and Namakumari (2004), as cited by Rehman et al. (2014), "the primary objective of advertising is to gain popularity." Advertising also engages consumers emotionally and intellectually to build brand loyalty and draw in prospective customers. Oyesomi and Salami (2019) emphasise that the goal of advertising is "to promote goods and services to the public with the intention of increasing sales." Ogundele and Adu (2024) describe advertising as "a component of the marketing mix that utilises various communication channels to inform and persuade target audiences." These channels can range from traditional media like print and broadcast to more unconventional forms such as human billboards and digital platforms, enhancing its ability to reach audiences effectively and broadly.

Dompey and Baidoo (2024) define advertising as a type of marketing communication that delivers a clearly sponsored, non-personal message in audio or visual form to promote or sell a product, service, or concept. Advertising has long served as a means of introducing goods and services to the public, relying on compelling messages to capture interest and influence behaviour. The core purpose of any advertisement is to provoke a desired response from the audience after encountering the message. If an advert fails to drive action, it is considered ineffective. Therefore, a successful advertising campaign depends on meticulous planning and execution. Zigmond and Stipp (2010), cited in Lanihun and Essien (2015), affirm that "the ultimate goal of every advertisement is to motivate consumers to take some action in favour of the advertised product and the commercial message."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have explored advertising, particularly its dynamics within a multicultural society like Nigeria. In his work titled *Language Use and Communication Artifacts in GSM Adverts in Nigeria*, Samuel (2010) examined the sociolinguistic techniques—such as code-switching, ethnographic elements, semiotics, and neologisms—employed by advertisers to capture consumer interest and enhance brand recall. Through a content analysis approach, the study found that advertisers frequently utilised both Nigerian Pidgin English and Standard English to appeal to a broad audience. Nigerian Pidgin English emerged as the predominant code in television advertising, effectively reaching a wide viewer base. Samuel emphasised that these advertisements highlight language as a powerful and persuasive tool of communication, essential for social interaction in a space marked by diverse interests.

In a related study, Alimi and Kalin (2022), in *The Cultural Attitudes in Advertising Designs in Nigeria*, explored how audiences respond to culturally relevant imagery in billboard advertising and their interpretations of indigenous visual symbols used in marketing. Their findings showed that incorporating key socio-cultural values into ad designs—alongside simplicity and modesty—significantly increases audience engagement with the content. Likewise, Ogundele and Adu (2024), in their study *The Evolution of Advertising in Nigeria: Promoting Local Content for Sustainable Development*,

examined how advertising contributes to the development and visibility of local content within Nigeria's multicultural environment. They concluded that understanding how audiences respond to localised content enables advertisers to design more impactful campaigns that not only resonate with consumers but also promote sustainability and conscious consumerism.

EVOLUTION OF ADVERTISING IN NIGERIA

Bel-Molokwu (2000), as referenced by Bardi (2015), maintains that “advertising is as old as man.” Several scholars have proposed that the concept of advertising originated in the Garden of Eden, where Satan promoted the forbidden fruit to Eve (Genesis 3:4–5), who subsequently introduced it to her husband, Adam (Genesis 3:6b), resulting in both partaking of it. The devil presented a persuasive argument, emphasising the supposed benefits of the fruit: they would not die and would become like God. As stated in Genesis 3:4–5, the serpent told the woman, “You will not certainly die... For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Olakitan (2012) echoes this view, stating that “in Biblical history, we can safely say that the first advertising began when the serpent advertised the qualities of the forbidden fruit to Eve, and she subsequently advertised the same fruit to her husband, Adam. Similarly, Oyekola (2005), cited in Osisanwo (2013), affirms that the roots of advertising can be traced back to Eden, where Satan deceived Eve into eating the forbidden fruit, convincing her that “a bite would grant her the opportunity to discern good from evil.

In Nigeria, early forms of advertising included town crying and symbolic illustrations found on caves and rocks (Olakitan, 2012). According to Bel-Molokwu (2009), the advertising practice in Nigeria initially involved town criers using morning gongs to relay messages to the villagers. Olatunji (2018), through a historical literature review, highlights the chronological development of communication methods in relation to advertising. He notes that the town crier was the most prominent advertising medium of the time, and its influence persists today through hawkers who vocally promote their products in public spaces. During its formative years, advertising in Nigeria was largely unstructured and lacked regulation, despite the presence of professional organisations such as the Association of Advertising Practitioners of Nigeria (now known as the Association of Advertising Agencies of Nigeria – AAAN) and the Advertising Council of Nigeria (ACON). These bodies were not initially vested with the authority to enforce advertising standards (Olakitan, 2012).

The first printing press in Nigeria was established in Calabar in 1846 by the Presbyterian Church (Bardi). A notable shift in advertising occurred with the launch of the country's first newspaper, *Iwe Irohin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba* (“Newspaper for the Egba-speaking People and Yoruba”), in Abeokuta in 1859 by Reverend Henry Townsend (Bardi). This publication marked the dawn of formal media advertising in Nigeria, as printed adverts began to feature in its pages. The success of *Iwe Irohin* led to the emergence of other newspapers. In 1863, Nigeria's first English-language newspaper, *Anglo-African*, was established by Robert Campbell (Osuniyi, 1999). By the late 1800s, additional newspapers had surfaced, including the *Lagos Times*, *Gold Coast*, *Lagos Observer* (1880), and *The Lagos Critic*, founded by Owen Macaulay in 1883. Bardi observes that many of these early newspapers did not survive for long, primarily because they failed to utilise advertising as a source of financial support.

Akpoptaire (2013) explains that advertising regulation in Nigeria is governed by a mix of federal and state laws, subsidiary legislation, and regulatory guidelines. These rules vary depending on the nature of the product being advertised. Three principal agencies oversee advertising practices: the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON), the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). However, a major shift occurred in 2022 when a new legislative framework was introduced. The Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) was renamed the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON) following the enactment of the ARCON Act. This new law replaced the outdated APCON Act and was designed to correct its shortcomings. Among the reforms introduced under ARCON was a prohibition on the use of foreign models and voice-over artists in advertisements aired in Nigeria, a move intended to foster and promote indigenous talent. Reporting for *The Punch*, Edeme (2022) noted: “The Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria has announced its change of name to the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria. This is as the council also banned the use of foreign models and voice-over artists on Nigerian advertising media.”

CLASSIFICATION OF ADVERTISEMENT

Advertising is generally divided into two main categories: above-the-line (ATL) and below-the-line (BTL). ATL advertising involves the use of mass media to promote goods or services to a broad and diverse audience. Common ATL channels include television, radio, and the internet. Pleshette (2003) explains that this form of advertising employs traditional mass communication platforms like newspapers, radio, television, and billboards. Etim and Inameti (2018) add that ATL advertising leverages mass media to reach varied and widely scattered audiences across different times and locations—groups that are typically inaccessible through BTL methods. Thus, ATL media, or advertising mass media, include electronic channels (such as television and radio), print media (including newspapers, magazines, and journals), and outdoor advertising like billboards.

On the other hand, BTL advertising focuses on engaging individual consumers directly, rather than reaching a mass audience as ATL does. BTL strategies include approaches like sponsorships, sales promotional offers, public relations, direct selling, and direct marketing such as telemarketing and email marketing. Prete (2015) characterises BTL advertising as involving all forms of marketing that rely on unconventional or non-traditional means of communication—which include PR, event marketing, direct marketing, and sales promotions—as opposed to ATL advertising, which makes use of traditional mass media like print, radio, and television.

ADVERTISING IN A MULTI-ETHNIC STATE

Since ancient times, Nigeria’s multicultural landscape has allowed individuals from various ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds to live together, despite their unique differences. Oluwadele, Adediran, and Olaogun (2023) affirm that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation with a wide range of cultural identities and affiliations. As a result, advertisements should be tailored to resonate with their specific target audiences by considering elements such as language, attire, and tone. Ogundele and Adu (2024) argue that “creating local content through advertising is one means of advancing sustainable development goals.” They suggest that incorporating elements of local culture and traditions into advertising messages enables companies to contribute to a

culturally enriched and sustainable Nigerian future. This approach is essential because individuals, groups, or communities tend to respond more positively to adverts that reflect their cultural heritage, beliefs, traditions, and values—factors that can either enhance or reduce an advertisement’s impact.

Conversely, Sa Lucia and Aixel (2013), as cited by Oluwadele et al. (2023), define culture as the complete lifestyle of a people, encompassing their modes of living, eating habits, dressing styles, social norms, rites of passage, and interpersonal interactions. For example, in the Nigerian context, an advertisement featuring a woman with a revealing neckline may not be well received by certain cultural groups. If such cultural sensitivities are ignored, the advertisement risks being rejected outright. Alimi and Kalilu (2022) support this perspective, stating that “in Aba (Abia State), people’s behaviour is influenced by their exposure to media, and indecent advertising visuals can have negative consequences.” Nigeria, with a population exceeding 220 million, is home to a vast number of ethnic groups with distinct languages. According to Adeyinka and Akinsola (2021), the country comprises over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 languages. This ethnic diversity means that cultural practices are handed down through generations. Although the number of ethnic groups and languages may remain relatively stable, the population within each group continues to rise, as reflected in Nigeria’s growing overall population.

LANGUAGE USE IN ADVERTISEMENT

Language is a fundamental element used to identify a group, community, society, or nation. It facilitates social interaction among individuals who share a common or similar culture and plays a vital role in preserving that culture. Ghafournia (2015) explains that choosing one language variety over another signals affiliation with a particular social group while simultaneously distancing oneself from others. Dastgoshadeh and Jalilzadeh (2011) emphasise that “language is inextricably linked with identity, and to preserve identity, efforts must be made to preserve language.” As noted by Picador et al. (1988), cited in Danladi (2013), language constitutes a significant part of a people’s culture—it is the medium through which they express their folktales, myths, proverbs, and history. Additionally, language is considered a component of national unity. A common saying is that when a culture loses its language, it also loses its identity and cultural values. Alfarhan (2016) reinforces this view, stating that “language is regarded as one of the most effective means of determining a person’s identity and cultural roots,” suggesting that without language, asserting cultural identity becomes difficult.

In Nigeria, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba are the three dominant languages, widely spoken and officially recognised. These major languages benefit from substantial government support, unlike the many minority languages that receive minimal or no official recognition (Ima and Udoh, 2020). Despite the prominence of these indigenous languages, English remains the dominant and widely accepted language across Nigeria due to its colonial legacy. It is the primary language used in official contexts such as government institutions, educational systems, and religious establishments. Since its adoption as the official language for governance, education, and media, English has held a higher status than native languages (Oluga and Okanlawon, 2008). Danladi (2013) highlights the critical role English has played in promoting national aspirations and unity through its designation as the “official language.” Introduced during British colonial rule, English has become Nigeria’s official and, in many respects, de facto national language (Mohammed, 2018).

Another widely spoken language in Nigeria is Pidgin, also known as *Pidgin English* or *Nigerian Pidgin*. It enjoys widespread use throughout the country. Ehondor (2020) reports that Nigerian Pidgin is now more widely spoken than the three major indigenous languages—Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba—and even surpasses English in terms of popularity. Nigerian Pidgin is an unofficial creole rooted in English but shaped through contact with various other languages, including Portuguese, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other local tongues (Agbo and Plag, 2020; Akande, 2021, as cited by Airemionkhale, 2023). These perspectives underscore the fact that language is a unique identifier for individuals, groups, communities, and nations. This uniqueness provides a strategic advantage for advertisers. To effectively reach target audiences, advertising messages must be crafted using appropriate language that aligns with both the message and its intended recipients. In Nigeria, advertisers select from among the major languages based on the characteristics of their target market. As Oluga and Okanlawon (2008) observe, various language forms are employed by advertisers of goods and services to attract and engage their audience effectively.

ADVERTISING MEDIA IN A MULTI-ETHNIC STATE

Ansari and Arash (2016) emphasise that “advertising media have the strongest relationship with brand advertising success and effectiveness,” making them arguably the most critical factors influencing advertising performance. Advertising media are central to the success of any advertising campaign, functioning as message conveyors that connect the advertorial content to its intended audience. Etim and Inameti (2018) describe the media as the channels through which advertising messages are delivered to target markets or audiences, underscoring that advertising campaigns cannot be actualised without the media. They liken media in advertising to the role of products in marketing, as no exchange can occur without awareness. Khot and Kumbhar (2023) add that marketers employ various media platforms to deliver compelling messages to their target demographics.

Due to their importance, the role of media in advertising has been the focus of extensive research. Advertising utilises a wide array of media channels, including broadcast media (such as television and radio), print media (like newspapers, billboards, leaflets, magazines, handbills, banners, and brochures), and digital media, also known as new media (such as websites and social media platforms). One of the key advantages of using advertising media effectively is its capacity to shape consumer purchasing behavior. Fan (2022) notes that marketers leverage different media platforms to influence buying decisions and nurture customer loyalty. Supporting this view, Dompey, Li, and Baidoo (2024) affirm that media advertising plays a role in every phase of consumer behaviour—from creating awareness and sparking interest to forming convictions, making purchases, and evaluating products post-purchase. In the same vein, Christian and Hidayat (2022) point out that selecting the right media channels positively impacts advertising effectiveness, highlighting media choice as a vital component of a successful advertising strategy.

Therefore, designing an advertising campaign—particularly in a diverse country like Nigeria—requires thorough consideration. Important factors to assess include consumer preferences (such as language, dress style, and tone), literacy levels, affordability, and access to media. Different media have varying requirements for accessibility. For example, television and radio typically require electricity, although some radios operate on batteries. As such, consumers without stable electricity may not receive messages

through these mediums. Similarly, digital media platforms demand mobile data and a digital device, excluding audiences without internet access or smartphones.

Moreover, people with low literacy levels or who are unfamiliar with the language used in the advert may find it difficult to engage with print media like posters or handbills. Hence, choosing the most appropriate medium for delivering advertising messages—especially in a context like Nigeria, where illiteracy, erratic electricity, unstable internet networks, and widespread poverty are significant issues—must be done with careful attention to accessibility, affordability, literacy, and audience preferences. As Akinyetun et al. (2021) explain, multidimensional poverty in Nigeria is driven by limited healthcare, lack of electricity, inadequate education, unsafe drinking water, and substandard housing. Additionally, the ethnicity and demographic composition of the target audience must be considered in selecting the most effective advertising medium.

LOCAL CONTENT AND LOCAL AGENCY IN ADVERTISING

The significance of this pair—cultural understanding and local content creation—cannot be overstated when planning an advertising campaign in a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria. Advertising agencies must possess a strong ability to develop content that resonates locally, grounded in a thorough grasp of the cultural ties and identities of their target audience. The importance of incorporating local content in Nigerian advertising was further underscored in a directive issued alongside the implementation of the new ARCON Act, which succeeded the APCON Act in 2022. One such directive, as reported by Edeme (2022) in *The PUNCH* newspaper, was titled *Ban on the Use of Foreign Models and Voice-over Artists in Nigerian Advertising Media*. It states that:

“In line with the Federal Government’s policy of developing local talent, inclusive economic growth and the need to take necessary steps and actions aimed at growing the Nigerian advertising industry, the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria, being the apex advertising, advertisement and marketing communications’ regulatory agency of the Federal Government, has in accordance with its statutory mandates, responsibilities and powers as conveyed by the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria Act No. 23 of 2022, bans the use of foreign models and voice-over artists on any advertisement used on the Nigerian advertising space with effect from 1st October 2022. All advertisements, advertising and marketing communications materials are to make use of only Nigerian models and voice-over artists.”

This directive, which arose from the ARCON Act, aligns with the view expressed by Alimi and Kalilu (2022) regarding the creation of content rooted in cultural representation. They noted that “while efforts are being made to produce content in indigenous languages and with attention to cultural elements such as gestures, traditional attire, and modeling, foreign content continues to dominate media platforms, gradually eroding cultural identity.” The use of local content and indigenous agencies can enhance the public image of a product or service, making it more favorably received by its target audience. Ogundele and Adu (2024), referencing feedback from a participant in their study *The Evolution of Advertising in Nigeria: Promoting Local Content for Sustainable Development*, reported that “advertisements rich in local content are more appealing because they are relatable and foster a stronger emotional connection.” Therefore, for an advertisement to be effective in a culturally diverse country like Nigeria, its message must align with the cultural values of the intended audience and remain relatable. Several past advertisements illustrate this principle effectively,

including *Mama na Boy* by MTN, *Mama do good o* by Indomie Noodles, and *Hypo go wipe o* by Hypo.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The essence of the literature reviewed in this study is well summarised by Mbaka and Udeh (2021), who stated that “the choice of media depends on the purpose of the message and the target audience intended.” This highlights the complex nature of advertising in a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria, where campaigns can easily fail if contextual factors are not properly addressed. It is widely recognised that advertising contributes significantly to business growth, and it is no surprise that companies allocate substantial budgets to it. Manjhi, Priya, and Kanojia (2023) emphasised that advertising expenditure should not be seen as a cost, but as an investment that enhances a company’s sales, profitability, scalability, and brand equity. Samuel (2010), employing ethnographic and semiotic analysis, examined six advertisements in relation to Nigeria’s ethnic diversity. One of these was the MTN television advert titled *Mama, na boy*, translated as *Mummy, it’s a boy* in Standard English. The advert reflects cultural influence through its setting, costumes, language, and storyline. It also portrays the culturally rooted preference for male children in Nigerian society. This cultural theme is in line with Nnadi’s (2013) observation that son preference is deeply ingrained in many Nigerian cultures, tied to issues such as inheritance and lineage continuity. Nnadi noted that “the preference for sons is very prevalent and exists in several cultures, dating back to prehistoric times... the desire for a son to carry on the family name and ensure lineage continuity remains strong.” Samuel (2010) concluded that the advert mirrors societal realities, where the birth of a male child is celebrated more than that of a female child. The advert also features cultural elements from southeastern Nigeria, illustrating how that region traditionally celebrates the birth of a child.

Another advertisement analysed by Samuel (2010) was the Globacom TV advert titled *Amebo*, meaning *a gossip* in Standard English. The ad employed Nigerian Pidgin English, and its title comes from Yoruba, one of Nigeria’s indigenous languages. Samuel argued that language choice is key in connecting with audiences and fostering positive responses to advertisements. This is evident in the growing use of Nigerian Pidgin and other local languages in advertising across the country. A study by Alimi and Kalilu (2022) also agrees with the need to consider certain factors before implementing any advert in the Nigerian setting. In their study on “Cultural Attitudes in Advertising Design in Nigeria,” it was revealed that graphic designs without locally derived content were not persuasive enough to elicit a positive response from the targeted audience. In contrast, designs that incorporated such elements had a positive response. Alimi and Kalilu (2022) further recommended that “graphic designers of advertising visuals should endeavour to create more compelling advertisements that are culturally motivating and can be easily interpreted by the targets. Advertising designers should ensure that content is created in local languages with considerations for cultural symbols.”

In a related study by Ogundele and Adu (2024), titled *The Evolution of Advertising in Nigeria: Promoting Local Content for Sustainable Development*, the findings reveal a nuanced relationship between global advertising approaches and local cultural expression. Drawing from the Development Media Theory, the study highlights that the strong preference for localised content among respondents suggests that embedding cultural elements in advertisements can significantly enhance their effectiveness. This, in turn, supports sustainable development by fostering local businesses and safeguarding

cultural heritage. The research further shows that achieving cultural sustainability through advertising requires the implementation of culturally sensitive campaigns, adherence to ethical practices, inclusive representation of Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape, the integration of sustainability messages, encouragement of local content creation, and ongoing public education to prevent cultural stereotyping or misrepresentation (Ogundele & Adu, 2024).

These findings are consistent with the Consumer Multicultural Identity Affiliation (CMIA) Framework, which suggests that consumers in multicultural societies are often influenced by their cultural identities, which affect their brand choices and purchasing decisions. Cleveland (2018), as cited in Kipnis, Demangeot, Pullig, and Broderick (2019), describes this framework as a tool for understanding consumers' cultural orientations, enabling marketers to develop socially responsible and culturally appropriate advertising strategies in diverse cultural settings.

CONCLUSION

From the conversation highlighted above, it is evident that advertising can either thrive or fail in a multi-ethnic state such as Nigeria. The success or failure of an advertisement is largely determined by the advertiser's cultural understanding, which includes awareness of cultural symbols such as language, costume, and other relevant elements. Consequently, culturally composed advertorial messages tend to appeal more easily to the audience, as they can relate to the content more readily than to foreign material. Therefore, integrating cultural values into advertising in a multi-ethnic setting like Nigeria plays a consequential role in determining the outcome of an advertisement.

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